



on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic



Ken Rand

A.B. Goelman

Kevin Cockle

Wes Smiderle

Steven Mohan, Jr.

Daniel Ksenych

Steven Mills

Gary Archambault

Christian McPherson

cover art

Frank Wu

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on spec

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Get political!

Diane L. Walton, General Editor

RECENTLY, THE MAGAZINE INDUSTRY IN CANADA RECEIVED some rather disturbing news.

Major cuts are being proposed to some programs the federal government initiated over the past few years. Programs designed to assist Canadian magazines such as *On Spec*—namely the Canada Magazine Fund and the Publications Assistance Program (PAP). Each, in its own way, helps level the playing field and keep us competitive with our neighbor publications to the south. The PAP helps us by subsidizing our postage costs, and the CMF helps by allowing Canadian magazines to implement new initiatives and promotions not covered in their operating budgets.

Currently, the CMF is assisting the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association (CMPA) with a massive advertising campaign to make Canadians aware of what an amazingly diverse home-grown magazine industry we have. (The “Genuine Canadian Magazine” logo on the front of this issue, along with the back cover ad, are part of this campaign.) We need these programs to continue without a reduction in the levels of support! If they are reduced, then any progress made in the past five years is automatically reversed, and we are back where we started.

If you want to see *On Spec* and other small magazines continue to publish without sacrificing quality, then GET POLITICAL! Write to your member of parliament, and to the Hon. Sheila Copps, Minister of Heritage, and tell them just how much you, the voters, value Canadian magazines. Mail to your MP is postage free, so tell them how you feel.

And while you are at it, how about finding a friend and telling them about *On Spec*? If you refer someone to us, and they buy a new subscription, we will add a free issue to your existing subscription. So four new subscribers gets you another year of *On Spec*. How sweet is that? •

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There was another odor, something oily—something mechanical, as if the entrails came from inside a lawn mower rather than a dead fish...

Gone Fishin'

Ken Rand

ORVILLE LOOKED UP AND SAW JACK HOLDING A LUMPY SACK and grinning a gap-toothed smile, his back to the sun setting over Elliot Bay.

"What's that?" Orville asked.

"Fish." Jack nodded at the sack. It shuddered wetly. "I finally caught me some fish. I knew they'd come back. I knew it."

Madeline grunted and ran the stump of her tongue over thin lips. She set aside the shoes she'd been repairing and stood upright, knobby legs wobbling. She coughed. Orville stood too, slowly. He favored his game leg as he rose, giving up his nap, his place in the shade.

"How'd you catch 'em?" Orville frowned at the four soggy lumps in the sack Jack held out for Madeline and Orville to inspect. Madeline cooed as she reached out a hand to touch the fish and Jack pulled the sack away, a possessive frown creasing his brow, his good eye glaring.

"Used dynamite," Jack rasped. He hawked and spat something phlegmy on the dirt.

"Bullshit."

Jack shrugged. "I yelled 'Orville's an asshole' and they bellied up, laughed themselves to death. Should have tried that years ago."

"That I believe. Still, it has been a while. Maybe we shouldn't." Jack

looked crestfallen. Orville looked at Madeline, at the pleading in her eyes. She grunted a question at him, pointing at the sack.

"Maybe we should, Orville," Jack added. "Huh? After all, I told you. Didn't I?"

Madeline grunted something at Orville. It might have been "Please?"

"Well, maybe," Orville said. "But I eat first. If I don't get sick, you can dig in."

Jack giggled. Madeline smiled.

"And we cook 'em," Orville added. He began absently looking around for material for a fire. He saw nothing usable.

Madeline grunted a question to Orville.

"Maybe cooking'll clean out any poisons, dear," he told his old partner. "If there's any in 'em. Leastwise, it's a good precaution. Justifies a fire, I think." He smiled and his yellow eyes hid behind crinkled skin that arched deep up the side of his bald, freckled head.

Madeline looked out past Jack, across the bay at the spiky, dull-black skyline of the old city. Jack turned and squinted at the city. He turned back to Orville and shrugged.

Orville touched Madeline gently on one bony shoulder. "There's nobody left to see our smoke, old girl, except ghosts. Nobody left. Just us."

Still, Madeline's sad eyes drifted back to the cracked horizon that had once been the city. She shuddered and coughed. But when she regained eye contact with Orville, he gave her his best smile. She returned it with a sharp nod.

Jack let out an audible sigh as he squatted on his heels to clean the catch. "I remember how to do this."

"We'll cook 'em inside number five." Orville nodded toward the big warehouse, the only one left in the industrial complex with an intact roof. "Smoke won't get out much."

He shuffled off to get firewood.

Madeline grunted at him, a caution. He stopped and turned to her. "I'll be careful." He patted the old pistol he wore in a cracked leather holster on his right hip. It didn't work, never had, but she didn't need to know that. "And I won't go far. Just to the lumberyard. An hour, maybe."

Madeline seemed reassured. She nodded, humming in her throat as Orville turned and walked away.

In a moment he reached the far corner of warehouse number four, and Jack's industrious muttering faded behind him. His muttering was replaced by the whisper of a casual breeze poking among the berry vines, nettles and weeds and creaking siding and shattered floorboards of the dilapidated buildings still standing, or half-standing, in the old district.

Around the corner, the weedy street paralleled the old railroad tracks into the edge of the city, the part of the city that wrapped around the curve of the bay, the industrial area. Follow this road, half a day or so, and you wound up in the city's heart. The broken heart. This part of the city had been old, half abandoned before the end.

Orville walked quietly for a while, listening to the dead landscape whisper to itself. The quiet, punctuated now and then by a shallow, hot wind, a reluctant wind, sat on Orville's shoulders like a familiar coat. He knew this place, knew its sounds, its tastes, its feel. It didn't smell oily and taste gritty like he remembered the city center had where he'd met Madeline that long ago. Her tongue had been cut out not long before he found her, feverish, bleeding, moaning. He nursed her back to health. She spoke only in grunts that he couldn't understand, so she wrote her name for him in answer to his question, and they became friends. But she never told him what happened. And she preferred silence to grunts.

They never made love and he never pressed the issue. He understood. That was enough.

Her terror prompted him to leave the city, take her with him. It wasn't the growling and wet gnawing sounds of the scavengers in the streets devouring the dead that upset her. The stench of death had ended quickly and the scavengers had left too. Her terror came from the occasional mechanical sounds as the decaying city folded in on itself, metal rasping against metal, the thump of something falling against the pavement, a window breaking, fires crackling and hissing. The sounds of man, or rather, evidence that man had been there. He couldn't convince her they were the last.

When they found Jack in Wesley's Sporting Goods store, on Central and Third, giggling hysterically as he tried out golf balls to replace his recently lost glass eye, Orville finally gave in, acknowledged her terror. They left the city proper, meaning to go deep into the forest southeast of the city.

Jack went with them. They didn't get far. They settled in the Cofold Industrial Park across the bay by the docks. Jack's idea.

"My territory," he'd said. He'd been a bum, before. "I know where to find shelter from bad weather, where to find food, and," he nodded to Madeline, "where to hide from folks that intend to harm you."

Madeline had looked at Orville for reassurance. He nodded, she brightened, eyes twinkling—her eyes were so big and pretty back then—and nodded agreement.

They lived in warehouse number three, four and five, and half a dozen other shelters up and down the vast industrial complex. The warehouses

provided abundant canned food caches, which turned out to be fortuitous since the animals disappeared the next winter and they had nothing to hunt.

All gone, the larger animals. Gone, overnight it seemed. No coyotes howling in the night, no cats yowling, no dog packs in the streets, no birds. Not even rats. Nothing even so large as a lizard or a snake. Precious few insects. And no fish, as Jack complained.

They moved about, ever alert in the pervasive eerie quiet that hung over them like a fog. They saw no animals, no people. They were alone.

Jack continued to fish, his obsession. He caught nothing over the years. They settled in. And they grew old.

Orville's bad leg burned by the time he reached the lumberyard, Mitchell's Lumber & Supply. He rigged a travois from two long, thin boards, stacked scrap wood on it and began the twenty-minute trip back to his companions in the shade between warehouse three and four.

Halfway there, a scuttling noise impinged on his thoughts, a faint scritching, persistent and loud enough for him to hear it above his own labored breathing, as if something small and leathery moved purposefully among the weeds. He stopped, stood motionless, and held his breath. He blinked sweat from his eyes and he thought he caught a fleeting glimpse of something scurrying over the rusty rail paralleling his path a few yards to his left. It looked like a tail. A rat tail. He stared at the spot, breath in his throat.

The scritching noise came again after a few moments and a head rose above the rail at the spot Orville watched. Small, bright, beady eyes stared back at him. Impossibly long wiry whiskers twitched at the end of a long snout. The creature's lips pulled back and Orville saw razor sharp teeth.

The creature's hiss sounded like static from an old radio. Orville smelled machine oil and tasted ash grit on his tongue. Something about the way the late morning sun shone on the creature; its huge quivering ears looked like little aluminum sails. Its teeth looked like stainless steel spikes.

A sudden, sharp pain struck Orville in the heart and he gasped and fell to the ground, clutching his chest. His vision dimmed to a single bright spot. He lay on the ground, blinking the pain away, refusing to lose consciousness.

He lay on his back, half buried under his burden of loose firewood, waiting for the pain to go away, gathering strength.

At last, the pain reduced to a dull ache and his breath under control, Orville stood and walked to the spot where he'd seen the rat.

Or thought he'd seen—something.

Nothing. No footprints in the rocky rail ballast or on the hard-packed

dirt nearby, no weeds bent aside as if by a moving weight the size of a small cat. No oily odor, no scat. He checked the rusty rail for discoloration, scratch marks from claws or teeth. He saw none.

He sighed, stood and reholstered the useless pistol he hadn't remembered drawing and reshoulder the firewood load.

An illusion, he told himself as he moved forward. Hallucination. *Do people have hallucinations as they grow older? And the chest pains: a heart attack?*

He shook his head. *No, not now, not while Madeline is sick. Can't afford the time to be sick myself. Need to stay healthy, to help Madeline get over her—cold. Or whatever made her cough.*

He decided as he hefted the load behind him to take it straight to number five. No need asking them to help tote it. It'd give him time to think about what just happened.

When he arrived at warehouse number five, he decided to not tell Madeline and Jack about what he'd seen and what had happened. Not yet.

They weren't there.

"Madeline? Jack?" Orville's voice echoed through the vast warehouse, coming back hollowly from the dim corners where canned food pallets rose to the ceiling. Dust hung in the still, hot air in fine silver sparkles.

"We're here." Jack's call came faintly from outside, around by number four, their usual day camp in the summer.

Orville sighed, regretting the effort to walk the farther distance to them. The chest pain had subsided, but his bad leg burned at the knee. He hobbled toward his companions.

"What?" He demanded from a distance.

Madeline stood with her back to Orville, arms crossed under sagging breasts, shoulders hunched, looking down. She looked cold and she coughed, a light shuddering rasp.

Jack knelt over something in the dirt, head cocked to one side, peering out his good eye. The catch, Orville realized, as he limped forward; that's where Jack was cleaning the catch when I left an hour ago to get wood. Jack sat on his heels, knees apart, poking at the soggy mess on the ground with a knife like he was stirring a low fire. Jack's rubber face usually appeared on the verge of manic laughter. It now sagged at the jowls and his good eye brimmed with tears.

"You look, Orville." Jack pointed at the fish guts. "I don't know. I just don't know."

Jack had gutted two fish, each a foot long. The flesh of those fish lay next to the two other fish, also a foot long each, as yet ungutted. The fish guts lay in two small piles next to each other.

Orville bent, knee popping painfully as he did, and looked at the mess.

A fishy musk assailed his nostrils, and he stifled a sneeze. And there was another odor, something oily—something mechanical, as if the entrails on the ground came from inside a lawn mower engine rather than a dead fish.

"Look at 'em." Jack urged, revulsion in his voice. He sounded like he was going to puke. "*Look at 'em.*"

"I'm looking, I'm—"

Cogs and wheels where there should be flesh and cartilage. Thin coppery wires linked to tiny rectangular colored bits of—ceramic?—and what looked like globs of a grotesque cross between microcircuits and entrails.

The flesh was pale greenish, toadlike.

Orville touched a finger to the greasy mess and rubbed it between his fingers. "Like a machine oil, almost," he muttered to himself.

"With metal shavings in it," Jack added. Orville noticed the silvery shavings dotting the yellowish oil.

"Maybe these are malfunctions," Jack said. "Maybe that's why I caught them so easily. They broke, short-circuited or something."

Madeline's coughing turned to a gut-deep retching. She vomited and neither man looked her way.

"We'd best bury this," Orville said.

"How come? There's no—"

"Bury it."

"Okay, okay."

Jack ran inside number four. Orville rose and turned toward Madeline, who stood, shaking, back to him, her coughing diminished a little. He made as if to touch her, reassure her with his touch, but he hesitated; the touch would be a lie, he knew. He had no reassurance to offer. Something was wrong and it did no good to lie.

He'd have to tell them about the rat-thing he'd seen.

But not now, not yet.

"We'll move," he began. "We'll head south, go where it's warmer—"

She turned and clutched him, sobs muffled against his bony chest, fingers digging into his back. She shook her head.

"We're too old, ain't we, girl? Is that it? We're too old to run away."

Madeline nodded.

Jack had returned with a shovel. He dug a hole in the soft, dry dirt next to the fish entrails and scooped them into it. He stamped on the dirt mound, a small shuffle dance fueled by anger and revulsion, and by fear, until the ground compacted flat and the only sign of the fish remaining was a greasy smear and a machine oil tinge in the air.

When he finished, Jack tossed the shovel away, as far as he could.

toward the bay. It landed with a metallic clatter on the broken asphalt near the road leading to the yacht loading ramp. Pat's Yacht Club. Jack's favorite fishing spot.

That night, Orville found himself clutching the useless gun in a sweaty hand under his thin blanket. He wondered if he could find a real gun in one of the pawn shops a few miles around the bay, farther toward the city center. If any of the shops stood anymore.

No. That section of the city had been among the first to burn. It had burned several times since; the last fire they'd seen in that direction had occurred twenty years ago.

As he listened to Madeline's buzzsaw snoring, he considered options. They could make slingshots, bows and arrows, crossbows, blowguns. They could rig traps and detectors around the warehouse, plug up the holes in the walls and roof. Sleep off the ground, maybe even sleep on a raft a few yards out in the bay itself.

They couldn't leave. They were too old. Where would they go?

Orville listened for the sound of scratching. Nothing.

He heard Jack stirring in his nest a few dozen yards away beyond the fringe of rusted oil drums Jack had stacked up, a crude low wall between him and his companions: to give them their privacy, him his space.

"You awake, Orville?"

Orville rose quietly. Madeline coughed once, rolled over and went back to sleep.

He walked to the huge open doors of the warehouse, into the night air. Jack joined him.

They stood in silence for a long while.

"You reckon they're back?" Jack nodded at the skeleton of the city, a darker silhouette against the dark night sky. A sliver moon cast occasional sparkling highlights on the surface of the bay between them and the city corpse.

"They?"

"The ones who did all that." A nod toward the city again.

"You mean the fish?"

"They made automatic machines, you know. Some of them were fighting machines, killing stuff. They must have done something to the fish. Goddam 'em. Messing with the goddam fish like that."

"What?"

"You saw. Trying to make machines out of the goddam fish, for chris-sake. Or something. Goddam 'em. You saw."

"Yeah. I saw."

"Goddam 'em. Ruining good fish like that. What the hell do you

suppose they had in mind?"

"I don't know, Jack."

They stood in silence for a while longer. The night was quiet except for the lazy lapping of waves against the pilings a hundred yards away. A loose board creaked high up on the side of the warehouse. Familiar sounds.

"What do you suppose it's all about, Orville? Those fish, I mean?"

"I don't know, Jack."

Silence again.

Then: "Ruining perfectly good fish. Goddam 'em." And Jack went back to bed.

In the morning, Orville found a spot of blood on the thin blanket where Madeline had slept. He found her outside, in the shade, an open can of Del Monte peas in her hands. She'd changed clothes. She dipped knobby fingers into the can and jammed gobs of peas into her cheeks and chewed. For the moment, she didn't cough.

She smiled when she saw him, chewing, and nodded toward the can sitting at her side, another can of peas, opened and waiting for Orville. He returned the smile.

"Where's Jack?" he asked, sitting.

Madeline nodded toward the bay. Jack had gone fishing again.

Orville walked toward the spot where they'd buried the machine-fish entrails the day before. He scuffed at the signs of scratching in the dirt, burying the signs. At least one fish had been dug up during the night. By something.

In a moment, they heard a whoop coming from the bay, Jack's cracked whoop, and in another moment, they saw him running toward them, holding something out in one hand. A fish. He'd caught another fish.

"Look," he demanded, panting. Orville and Madeline stood and moved closer to Jack and his catch.

The fish dangling from its huge gaping mouth at the end of Jack's arm was two feet long, blackish on its backside with a gray-white underbelly. It flipped its tail and struggled, glassy eyes bulging.

"I don't know," Orville said. Madeline stood behind him, hands on his shoulders, as he touched the wet, shuddering flesh and sniffed at his finger. It smelled fishy. Just fishy. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Aw, c'mon, Orville," Jack pleaded, blinking sweat from his good eye. "This one's okay. Look, I'll show you."

Jack knelt, took a knife from a sheath at his waist and slit open the fish from throat to tail. "See, it's—"

Jack recoiled as a thick oily mass spurted out in sluggish jets, brownish and reeking of things mechanical. Orville caught a glimpse of cogs,

wheels, wires and other things that didn't belong inside a fish—or any living animal—before Jack grabbed the fish-thing and, with a grunted scream of revulsion, threw it into the weeds, toward the bay.

Madeline began to cough and Orville held her, patting her back, chanting "There, there." Useless. But necessary.

They passed the day doing little but sit in the shade and listen to the world around them, the empty, near-silent world. At last, toward dusk, Jack went fishing again.

Long after sundown, Orville lay waiting for the comfort of sleep to overtake him. Madeline snoring at his side, when he heard a soft, furtive scuttling noise from outside the warehouse, among the weeds. The noise sounded like the rat-thing he'd heard the day before and it froze the breath in his throat. It came from where Jack had thrown the fish, or the thing that looked like a fish, or from near there.

Orville looked at Madeline. She slept on. He stood and tip-toed out toward the sound.

At the warehouse door, a sliver moon accented the scene before Orville a few yards away. At the same time it occurred to him that he hadn't seen Jack come back from his dusk fishing excursion, at the same time he felt a twinge of regret that he hadn't mentioned the rat-thing to his companions yet. He realized what he saw now wasn't the rat-thing. Crouched in the weeds, gnawing at the fish-machine: Jack.

Orville ran toward Jack, a shout contending with the bile rising in his throat, when Jack turned toward him and uttered an animalish growl.

Orville stopped. Slick goo ran down Jack's chin, glistening in the moonlight. He held the fish in both hands by the tail and head, under his chin, pale flesh exposed along its backside.

"Mine," Jack growled.

"Jack, you don't know what—"

"It's fish, Orville. Fish, goddam it. I don't care what it's got inside, what they did to it, goddam 'em. I ain't eating the guts. The flesh is still fish and I'm eating it. Been too long. Too goddam long."

"Jack. Jack?"

Jack went back to gnawing at the fish, a manic gurgle in his throat.

Orville watched Jack devour the fish for another minute before he turned and threw up. Jack ignored him, just kept on eating, slurping and gurgling.

In time, Orville went back to his cot in the warehouse and lay, trying not to listen to Jack's noisy feast. In time, the obscene noise ended and Orville heard Jack shuffle toward his bed. He heard Jack lay down with a satisfied grunt.

In time, Jack burped, farted and began to snore.

Madeline slept, snoring accented with an occasional cough.

Orville didn't rise until the sun had climbed high in the sky and the heat of the cloudless day found its way deep into the warehouse interior. Madeline was gone, her blanket gone too. A dark, glistening blotch on the floor under her cot looked like blood.

Orville stood, breathing hard. "Madeline? Jack?"

A humming sound came from outside the warehouse door. Madeline, as if to say, "I'm here."

Orville went outside. Madeline sat in the shade, holding an opened can of peas out to Orville. She'd cleaned up again. She mumbled, smiled and tilted her head: "Have breakfast?"

"Sure, thanks." Orville took the offered can. He held it but didn't eat.

"Where's Jack?" He looked around, toward the bay, toward the spot where the fish had been, the site of Jack's midnight feast. No sign.

Madeline shrugged.

"I'm going to see if I can find him." Orville put the uneaten can of peas down and started out, acknowledging Madeline's meaningless humming with a wave of a hand.

As he walked away, he heard her struggling to stifle her coughing. It sounded deeper in her chest, wetter, more racking than before.

She was getting worse. He didn't want to think about it.

He found Jack a few minutes later on a soggy, wooden raft-like platform tied to some old pilings at the end of a pier just beyond the yacht club. He crouched on his hands and knees at the platform edge, bent over the placid greenish water a foot from his face, looking into the water.

Into the water? Or at his reflection?

Orville came closer, pushing the waist-high weeds aside, not caring to be quiet; he wasn't trying to startle Jack, or sneak up on him. He stopped twenty yards away.

"Jack?"

"Did you ever wonder who they were, Orville?" He spoke without looking up, voice uncharacteristically calm, sober. Sane. His face still pressed inches from the surface of the bay water as he spoke, as if he had addressed a mirror.

"Who? Who *who* were?"

"The ones who killed everybody. Ended it all. Why would anybody do a thing like that? Who were they?"

Orville stepped closer. Carefully. Slowly. A sense of quiet dread had crept into his veins and clutched at his heart, like he'd felt the instant after he'd heard the scritching noise, an instant before he'd seen the noise's source, the rat-thing. Something about Jack, the way he talked,

looking into the water.

"I don't know, Jack."

"I figure they didn't expect to die too. They figured to kill everybody else, but not themselves. They must have had some way planned for them to survive the shit they handed out to everybody else."

"Maybe so." Orville took another step closer.

"They had those automatic machines, you know. Maybe they had machines that would make them well when they got sick. Or something."

Orville stepped closer. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Jack turned to Orville. "Maybe?"

Jack looked up at Orville, who now stood a dozen feet away—through both eyes, wide, unblinking. *Two eyes; not one.*

For a moment, Orville stared gap-jawed. "Jesus H.—"

Jack stood and grinned, his usual manic giggle bobbing his Adam's apple. He pointed with the index fingers of both hands at both eyes as he approached Orville.

"I can see. Orville. Both eyes. I ate that goddam fish and my eye grew back. Overnight, it grew back. There was something in that fish. Goddam. Can you believe that shit? Can you believe it?"

Jack grabbed Orville by the shoulders and shook him, his manic cackle a wet staccato, his grin exposing yellowed teeth.

Jack's breath reeked of oil, the spittle on his chin, yellowish, greasy.

Orville jerked himself from Jack's grasp, turned and stumbled away.

"Hey, Orville, it's okay—"

Orville shook his head, bile clogging his throat. He staggered away a few steps before he heaved.

Jack hovered solicitously while Orville sat, cross-legged, heaving. "Jesus, Orville," Jack muttered. "Jesus."

In time, Orville tried to talk as he sat, without looking up. His voice scraped over a sandpaper tongue. "There's reason we never talked about who we were, what we did—before. Good reason. You talk about them like they were somebody else. Different from you and me and Madeline. Different from—*me*. Did it ever occur to you that *I'm them*? Did it ever occur—"

"Jesus, Orville, what are you saying?"

"Automatic machines, you say? Sure, automatic machines. Machines for killing and how about machines for healing? How about machines that can make more machines just like 'em, machines that just take off and start running themselves? How about machines that use organic material to replicate—"

Madeline grunted a gagging, choking sound, and Orville and Jack

looked up. She staggered toward them, chin and chest covered with blood. Eyes wide in terror, she reached trembling fingers toward Orville and fainted.

Orville carried her frail body—she weighed nothing, feather-light—back to the shade of their day shelter. He gently laid her down on a cot where the breeze off the bay might ease her feverish, hacking breathing. Her eyelids fluttered and her skin felt cold.

Orville gripped the parchment skin over her skeletal hands. “There’s got to be a pharmacy somewhere, Madeline. I could go back into—”

Madeline shook her head, grunted gurglingly. She reached for Jack, who stood over Orville’s shoulder. Pointed at him. At his eye.

“I’ll get my pole,” Jack said. “But I don’t know how long it’ll take—”

“No time,” Orville said, sharp, tone edged with anger, regret. He turned to Jack and lowered his voice. “Dig up the ones you caught.”

Jack nodded and ran, his gait oddly stilted, wooden. Orville thought: *mechanical*.

Orville turned back to Madeline. The old woman looked up at him. Or tried. Her focus wandered and her breath came in shallow gasps.

She was dying.

“Hang on, old girl,” he cooed. “Hang on. Just need to get a little fresh meat into you is all and you’ll be okay. You’ll see. I know. I—I wasn’t in that project, you know, back then. Not directly anyway. But I heard about it. Nanotech guys got together with the boys in bioengineering. Pretty sophisticated stuff. Supposed to involve dogs only at first, I heard. Didn’t think it would really work. Fact is, when all the animals disappeared and those machine things didn’t come out in their place, I figured the project had failed. That’s why I didn’t say anything, back then. No need to, I figured.”

He shrugged. “I guess they went into hibernation. Or something. I don’t know. No idea how it got into the fish either. Or that rat-thing I saw—”

“Orville?” Jack had returned.

Orville turned. Jack stood, hands extended holding half a fish. It looked gnawed on along one edge by tiny teeth. “This was all that was left, Orville. Something dug up the rest.”

Orville took the slimy fish and pushed dirt off it with his thumb and fingers. He daintily pulled a clean, finger-long sliver of the flesh loose and held it out.

Madeline made a face, frothy lips turned down. She shook her head.

“Did you hear what I said, Orville? Something dug—”

“I heard.” Orville regretted his impatient bark. Still, he didn’t take his eyes from Madeline. “Listen, old girl,” he said softly. “We should have done something earlier, I know. But I couldn’t face it either. So I let on

to myself, just like you did, that it was only a cold. Well, it isn't."

Tears streaked down Madeline's corrugated cheeks.

"We're out of time, dear. And this'll work. I know. Make you better, make the cough go away. I promise."

At last Madeline nodded, reaching her chin forward and opening her mouth. "Just a little piece," Orville said. "At first. Make sure you can hold it down."

Madeline chewed listlessly and swallowed.

In seconds, her breathing grew less frantic and her eyes brightened. She looked at Orville, a questioning frown.

"Nanotechnology, old girl," Orville said. "Inside the fish. I figure, there're these little—"

Madeline shook off his words and reached a hand out, steadier this time, toward the fish, for more. Orville peeled a strip of flesh and held it out. She grabbed it and pushed it into her mouth and chewed.

"That's it. Chew it up. You're doing fine. Just fine."

After a few more bites, Madeline wobbled to a sitting position. She nodded to Orville as she extended a hand as if to say, "Help me stand up."

Orville did. Madeline tottered toward the warehouse. By the time she'd reached the big open doorway, her step had become steadier and she'd shaken off Orville's grip on her elbow. She went to her cot and lay down. She slept.

"Orville?" Jack tugged on his sleeve.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to go fishing. Okay?"

Orville nodded, without taking his eyes from Madeline's sleeping form. Her breathing came evenly. As he heard Jack leave the warehouse, Orville discovered he was crying.

In the cool, quiet dark of the warehouse, Orville thought he heard a scritching noise coming from a far, dim corner, behind the canned food pallets. He held his breath, listening.

The sound didn't repeat.

Orville flexed his game leg, feeling the tender ache behind his knee-cap. He placed a hand on his chest, feeling his own heart labor.

"Madeline, I'm going to go—"

Her eyes opened. She turned her head toward him, a slow movement of her neck, smooth, like the rotation of a robotic appendage. She opened her jaw and Orville thought he heard a small faint creaking.

He smelled oil, tasted grit.

A rivulet of greenish ooze ran down Madeline's chin. She licked it up with her new, whole tongue and smiled. •

A fly has to fight free from a web all by itself. Another fly tries to help, it's just going to get caught too...

Coyotes are an Urban Animal

A.B. Goelman

CHEYENNE HAS BEEN CLEAN FOR LESS THAN TWENTY-FOUR hours and it's only getting harder. She glances at Tommy across the alley and shivers—a combination of withdrawal, cold and envy. He's crouched between two dumpsters, fishing for a vein in his slim arm. She's not just jealous of him getting a fix. She's jealous of the syringe getting such intimate knowledge of his flesh, leaving him with that incredulous smile.

Tommy pulls the needle from his arm, looks up at her, and his smile fades. "Hey." He straightens and walks over to the stoop she's sitting on. He's still beautiful. Dark and lean, broad shoulders, high cheekbones. It's not fair. She looks more like a junkie than he does.

Cheyenne thrusts her hands deep in her pockets. "Hey. You done? I want to get back to the strip in time for the mission's dinner."

"What's your hurry? You can afford to miss a meal." Tommy seats himself on the stair below her and pokes her thigh through her jeans. "Let's stay off the strip for a while."

Cheyenne frowns—tries to think through her shivers. Tommy is usually impossible to pry away from the strip. "You avoiding someone?"

Tommy shrugs, but slumps forward slightly. Cheyenne suddenly feels much worse. "You bought from another dealer, didn't you?"

"Spider said he wouldn't sell me anything until I pay him back. And I needed a little taste." Without looking at Cheyenne he says, "We'll do something else for dinner."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. You'll think of something."

Just what she needs. To give up heroin and food on the same night. Cheyenne rises cautiously, trying to keep her legs steady. She glances down the alley to the crowded street beyond. The rain has momentarily lifted and Granville Street is full of pedestrians. There are couples walking out of the late movies, packs of teenagers going dancing, a few older men straggling to the girlie shows a few blocks down.

"I guess I could try singing," she says. She smoothes her hair and brushes futilely at her filthy blue jeans. The thing about the strip is you forget how far you've fallen.

Tommy is unexpectedly encouraging. "You should do it, baby. I bet you could make enough to buy us a few slices of pizza or something. Even Spider said you had a good voice."

Funny that Spider would notice, Cheyenne thinks. The dealer never struck her as the real musical type. But what the hell. She shrugs and walks to the corner, plants herself in the center of the sidewalk. People can't ignore you when they have to walk around you.

She begins with "I'm A Fool to Love You," followed quickly by "I Get a Kick Out of You." It's funny how natural it feels. Well, not that funny, really. Her dad had her singing the old blues standards almost before she could talk.

She sounds good, too. People who wouldn't even meet her eyes if they passed on the sidewalk stop to listen, drop a few coins in her cup before they leave. She hardly feels sick at all, now.

Cheyenne is the midst of "Why Shouldn't I Cry?" when a stray dog glides past her. Something about it breaks her concentration and she lets her voice taper off. It's very thin, and for a moment she wishes she had food to give it. The thought reminds her of her own hunger, and she scoops the cash from her cup into her pockets.

A man's voice behind her says, "It's strange to see coyotes in the city, isn't it?"

Oh shit. She turns around. "Hello, Spider."

"My dear Cheyenne." Spider nods in greeting, gestures at the animal

disappearing down the street. "Interesting isn't it? With none of their natural predators to keep them in check, the coyotes in this city are just running out of control." He bares his teeth in a crude imitation of a grin. "Not unlike some people I know."

Cheyenne forces herself to return his smile. It used to be easy to smile when she saw Spider. It was funny to see his moon face and fat pear-like torso next to the lean Honduran dealers who dominate the strip. He's hardly very threatening. Until you notice his eyes. Cheyenne shuffles her feet and hugs herself tightly. Without looking, she's certain that Tommy has ducked down the alleyway, leaving her alone to deal with Spider.

"Is something bothering you, Cheyenne?" Spider looks over her shoulder, towards the alley. "You seem nervous."

Cheyenne tells the truth. "I'm quitting. I got the hot-colds."

Spider spares her a quick glance. As always, his luminous silver eye entrances her. Spider's right eye could belong to a god. The silver iris is so large, you can barely see any white at all. It shimmers in the evening's dim light and seems to see directly through her. As always, it finds her wanting.

"You won't make it," he decides. "Not with Thomas continuing to indulge his vices with such reckless abandon. Speaking of which." He raises his voice, allows a slight edge to creep into it. "Thomas. I'm not playing games."

Tommy slinks into the light. When he first introduced her to Spider, Tommy told Cheyenne he liked buying from a guy whose arm he could break with one hand. But now he cowers before Spider's glare like a beaten dog. Like her mother used to cower before Albert, Cheyenne thinks for a second, before shaking the memory from her head.

"Thomas." Spider puts his arm around Tommy and draws him a few steps into the alley. After a moment Cheyenne follows. "I suspect you've made the unwise decision to hold out on me."

Tommy is sufficiently together to say, "No. No way, Spider."

"Ah." Spider nods. "My mistake. Pray tell, though. Which of my colleagues was kind enough to let you fix for free?"

Shit. Spider knew Tommy had bought from another dealer. Tommy isn't so high that he's not scared. "It was dirt cheap, Spider. I just couldn't afford to buy from you."

Spider shakes his head in mock disappointment. "You're an idiot. It was cheap because it was cut with powdered milk. My Honduran colleagues virtually invented the cut deck." Spider looks away from Tommy and glances up and down the alleyway. "What made you think you could buy from someone else before paying me back?"

"C'mon, Spider. You know I'm good for it." Tommy's voice is pleading.

"I know no such thing." Spider turns entirely away from Tommy to face Granville Street. The post-movie people have gone home, leaving the remaining crowd older, meaner. Spider's nostrils flare, as though as he's trying to smell something.

Even through her shivers and headache Cheyenne knows there's something strange going on. She's never seen Spider this distracted. If he was another dealer, he might be looking out for the police. But the police never bother Spider. No one ever bothers Spider.

Cheyenne once saw another dealer sell on Spider's corner. He hadn't finished his first sale when Spider appeared behind him. Spider didn't touch him, but the guy fell to the cement sidewalk like a brick. He lay there twitching as Spider took over and finished his sale. Then Spider turned around, and slowly, unhurriedly, cut a piece of flesh from the other dealer's arm—a long strip between the triceps and the elbow. Right there on a public sidewalk. The guy lay there bleeding for hours before someone dragged him away.

All of which makes her think that if Spider was really going to hurt Tommy, they would already know. "How much does Tommy owe you?" Cheyenne asks.

Spider doesn't turn away from Tommy. "Three hundred dollars."

Cheyenne's stomach drops even further, but her tone remains crisp. "So what do you want?"

Spider raises his blonde eyebrows. "What do you mean? I want my money."

Even shivering and sick, Cheyenne's not stupid. "Spider, you know we don't have that kind of money. So what are you looking for?"

Spider spins deliberately towards her, evaluates her once more with his silver eye. Cheyenne fights down the impulse to gag. "As it happens," he says, "there is something you could do for me. In the event that you agree, I might be convinced to overlook young Thomas' debt."

Tommy smiles at her encouragingly.

"I'm not whoring for you," Cheyenne says flatly. That's half the reason she's gone straight. She knows it's just a matter of time before Tommy asks her to sell it. Ironic, given his recent sexual appetite. These days, Tommy doesn't have the desire for anything that can't fit into a syringe.

Spider shrugs. His silver eye glimmers, sees right to the bottom of her. "You'll be selling your indubitable charms soon enough. But," he shakes his head, "not for me. I just want to engage your singing talents."

"For what?"

"An old friend of mine is in town. I want you to sing for him." Spider

steps out of the alleyway and points up Granville. "You see that old man sitting there with the coyotes?" Cheyenne follows his finger and sees the beggar he's pointing to, near the end of the next block. He's obviously blind—even from a distance his shrunken eye sockets are clear. Three coyotes are sleeping on the sidewalk around him.

As Cheyenne watches, one of them raises its head and looks directly at her. Looking closely, she sees that it looks more like a fox than a dog. She knows because there was a fox that lived near the cottage where her family used to go during the summer. She feels a wave of homesickness and says softly, "The coyotes are sort of sweet, aren't they?"

Spider spits. "Sweet? Dear child—they eat infants. They are sweet like vultures are sweet."

Cheyenne tries to ignore the nausea and the shakes for a moment. There must be something more to this favor. "So you just want me to go sing for your old friend?"

"Yes." Spider grins, and the hackles go up on Cheyenne's neck. It strikes her that she has never seen him genuinely smile before. "He has something of mine. And the old man has always been a fool for singers, especially pretty girls."

"Cheyenne, pretty?" Tommy says. "What, is he, like a blind beggar or something?" He snickers to himself.

Spider continues as if Tommy hadn't spoken. "Sing to him for a while. And then I want you to look for a ball—something like a large marble. Approximately this size." He shows her his thumb and forefinger in a circle about the size of a golf ball. "It's probably in the hat in which he keeps his money. Get it for me."

"She does this," Tommy interrupts again, "and you forget what I owe you?"

This time Spider turns to Tommy, catches him with the full power of his silver eye. Tommy shrinks away from his gaze, but Spider's voice is as calm as ever. "That's correct. I'll even throw in an extra ounce for each of you."

Cheyenne can almost see the saliva coming out of Tommy's perfect lips. She reckons that an ounce would kill him as surely as a bullet. If he doesn't OD, someone else will cut him for it. And besides, she doesn't want to steal from a blind man. She shakes her head. "I'm not interested."

Spider looks at her expressionlessly. "Forgive me. No doubt I was unclear. You will do this, or your boyfriend will die. Sooner rather than later." His silver eye shimmers and Tommy is suddenly lying on the sidewalk. Spider smiles at Cheyenne and walks away, towards the strip bars and closed pawn shops.

Tommy slowly rolls to a sitting position. He sees the look on her face and takes her hand, kisses it. "C'mon, baby. We'll pay the beggar back."

"Sure." Cheyenne offers him her hand, pulls him to his feet. She knows exactly when they'll pay the old man back—just as soon as Tommy works his way through Spider's reward. And anything else he can get his hands on.

"Please, baby. He's gonna kill me if you don't do this." Cheyenne says nothing but her shivers grow worse. Tommy is all she has. He kisses her on the lips and softly strokes her hair. "Don't cry. Listen, baby..."

His mouth works, but nothing else comes out. Until, abandoning his attempt at tenderness, he blurts. "Just get the fucking marble and we'll be fine."

So she finds herself approaching the coyote beggar. She puts her cardboard cup a few feet away from him and starts singing "Isn't It a Lovely Day?" She is midway into the song when the man starts singing along. He has a good voice in a Louis Armstrong sort of way, and they gather quite a crowd. When they finish, she finds a twenty dollar bill in her cup along with the usual change.

She looks at the beggar cautiously. At close range he doesn't look so bad. His shriveled eye sockets make him look older than he actually is. Up close, he is healthy, even muscular, with the vaguely Asian look of the British Columbia first nations. She wonders how he happened to catch Spider's attention.

He gently grabs one of the coyotes by the scruff of its neck and pulls. It rises, glares at him, and skulks off. He gestures to her. "Have a seat, darling."

She scoops the cash from her cup and awkwardly sits down on cement still warm from the coyote's heat. The man wrinkles his large nose and sniffs.

"I smell something familiar." It's difficult to tell with his disfigured face, but he seems to be fighting a smile. "Have you been visiting with an old friend of mine?"

Now that she's not singing, Cheyenne is shivering again. Strangely, though, when the man talks she feels a little better. "No. At least I don't think so."

He sniffs again. "Sure you were. I know, right? You have spider smell all over you."

"N-no," Cheyenne stutters, caught off guard.

"Whatever you say, missie." One of the beggar's desiccated eyelids quavers, moves up. It takes Cheyenne a moment to realize it's a wink. "So what's your name?"

"Cheyenne."

"Cheyenne," he repeats, grinning. "That's a good name. I used to hear that name all the time. You can call me—um." He wrinkles his brow and scratches the head of one of the remaining coyotes. "Hey, you want to hear a story?"

He keeps his money in a battered gray fedora sitting on the ground next to him. It's within an easy arm's length of her, but it's also less than a foot away from a coyote's mouth. She inches her hand towards the hat and responds, "Sure. I'd love to hear a story."

"I'll trade you. You go first."

The nearest coyote opens its eyes and watches Cheyenne. Her heart pounds, but after a moment she continues to reach for the hat. The coyote yawns, and playfully snaps at her hand, missing it by several inches. Still, she jerks her hand back and simply watches the coyote for a moment.

"You need help starting?" the beggar says. "Tell me how a smart kid like you ended up living on East Hastings."

Cheyenne is slightly surprised that he knows she's living on the strip. But she's absolutely astonished to hear herself answer with the truth. "My stepfather was beating my mother." She never even told Tommy that.

The man continues stroking the coyote's head. Cheyenne finds herself staring at his hands. They are lean and strong, bigger than she would have expected such a small man to have. She wonders what coyote fur feels like.

"After the second time I called the police, he told me he'd kill me if I ever called them again." Cheyenne closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. "When I told my mother..." Her voice trails off.

When she told her, her mother said in a barely audible whisper, "You better not call the police again, baby." The next day, Cheyenne bought herself a bus ticket to Vancouver.

The man pats her hand and for a moment the withdrawal nausea disappears altogether. He says, "That's not the sort of story I was looking for, girl. Too sad."

A smile suddenly breaks onto his ravaged face, like a single ray of sunlight piercing cloud cover. "I'll tell you a funnier one. It's about Iknome stealing Coyote's eye. Or maybe it's about how Coyote stole Iknome's wife." He pauses. "I think it has a funny ending, though."

As he speaks, Cheyenne remembers her mission. The coyote has closed its eyes once more, and she quickly grabs the brim of the hat and pulls it closer to her. Begins to gingerly pick through it.

"So Coyote and Iknome went for a walk. This was in the time of the First

People, when Coyote still had two eyes. But he was always losing them."

Once she's looked in his hat, Cheyenne immediately feels better about stealing a little ball. The beggar has more money than she's seen since leaving home. And she's not going to steal any of it. More importantly, she resolves not to mention it to Tommy.

"Coyote wasn't always as smart as he is now. On this walk I'm telling you about, he turned to his good friend Ikname, and said, 'Ikname, I lose my eyes too often. Will you hold one of them for me?'"

At the bottom of the hat she sees the ball. It is black, bigger than any marble she's ever seen, and soft to the touch. She palms it and gasps as it burns her hand.

"Surprised?" he asks. His smile widens slightly, inscrutably. "I guess you thought Coyote was smarter than that."

"Uh. Yeah," Cheyenne agrees, hardly listening. She wraps the ball in the sleeve of her shirt and clammers to her feet. Through the cotton the heat is soothing.

He gives her another of his ghastly winks. "To tell you the truth, I might be confusing things. This might just be one of those metaphors the first nations used to explain the world." He pauses, wrinkles his forehead. "Or it might be the literal truth. I've never been any good at telling the difference."

Cheyenne clears her throat. "Um. That's okay. I sorta have to go."

The beggar frowns and the coyote lying between them growls softly. "I hate owing people stories." He's silent for a moment, deep in thought, and then the frown vanishes. "Tell you what—I'll give you some advice instead."

"Okay," she says.

"You don't have to do anything."

She stares down at him blankly.

"A fly has to fight free from a web all by itself. Another fly tries to help, it's just going to get caught too." She waits for more, but he seems to forget she's there. He begins humming to himself.

After a moment she turns away. She sees Tommy down the street sitting at a bus stop bench. He is carefully and precisely picking at the scabs on the inside of his elbows. Behind him, Spider leans against the closed storefront of a used CD shop and grins directly at her. Her withdrawal symptoms are suddenly worse than ever. Spider's going to give her a whole ounce for this little sphere, and she can already feel how sweet that first hit will be. She can't imagine making it through another night without fixing, not if he makes it that easy.

She curses and drops the ball back into the beggar's hat. He snatches

it from the air without fumbling. Sluggishly, her brain moves through its paces. A blind beggar catches a ball in mid-air. His story about coyotes and stolen eyes. She shakes her head and immediately regrets it, as her temples begin pounding. It seems crazy but...

"Is that your eye?" She can feel Spider's gaze upon her, and she can barely get the words past her chattering teeth.

The beggar laughs. "What do you think? Does it look like an eye?" Cheyenne is writing off her question as a withdrawal-borne delusion, when the beggar taps the head of the nearest coyote. It opens its mouth, revealing a glimmering silver sphere on its tongue. "You can tell the difference, can't you? I figured I'd keep my other eye. Letting Iknome steal one was embarrassing enough."

He slips the hot black sphere into Cheyenne's pocket, disguising his motion as though he's stroking her thigh. Which he does, before she pushes his hand away. "Go ahead now. Give it to him."

Cheyenne has the feeling that even if she were straight, things wouldn't make sense. As it is, she doesn't care. Her body is trembling so much she can barely walk. Not just from withdrawal, but from cold, and hunger. It's all she can do not to crumple to the sidewalk where she stands. She tells herself she just needs a hot meal, and turns towards Spider once more.

Coyote calls after her, "Hey. You forgot to say what you want from me. Hey!" She keeps walking and hears him grumble in a lower voice, "I hate owing favors."

SPIDER WALKS FORWARD TO MEET HER. "WHAT HAPPENED?" HE ASKS. "WHAT DID he say while you were waiting there?"

Cheyenne can't think of any safe answer. So she simply throws him the black ball.

"Dear girl!..." Spider gasps. But he catches it. And looks at it suspiciously for a moment. "Hmm. The old man colored it black, did he? I wonder why." He pauses, and Cheyenne waits, certain he'll turn his eye upon her and see the truth.

But before Spider can pursue his question, Tommy is standing before him. Cheyenne hasn't seen Tommy move this fast for months. "Where's our dope?"

Spider plunges his hand into the pocket of his Gore-Tex jacket, emerging with a small ziplock bag. He puts it in Tommy's hand and smiles his false smile. "Enjoy." Stepping back into the CD shop doorway, Spider plunges the black sphere over his left eye.

It immediately sinks into his eye socket, covering his existing brown eye, but it doesn't take on the life of its silver partner. Cheyenne sees

a dark orange ember deep within it, like a dying fire being banked to life. And then, suddenly, the ember bursts into tiny flames, and Spider shrieks.

Then he begins to dance. For all his awkward pear shape his dance is beautiful. His thin limbs move faster and faster, forming a blur around him. His voice is calm, implacable: "Take the eye back, Cheyenne. You made a mistake." By now his body appears to have many more than four limbs. Cheyenne can't look away from the dance, and she feels herself begin to respond to his order.

She fights it, and he repeats, "Take the eye." She takes a step towards him. The two eyes, one fire-speckled black and the other silver, exist like islands of calm in a sea of frenetic motion. "Take the eye," he says once more. And she knows what she has to do. She reaches in, and plucks out the silver eye. It's easier than she would have thought—the eye almost leaps into her hand.

Spider shrieks with fury, and all motion stops. Suddenly he is simply standing there, face etched with pain, left eye blazing. His voice remains calm, though. "I should have been explicit, I suppose. I wanted you to take the eye which was causing me pain." He raises his hand to the fire in his left eye socket and screams once more. Then he is holding whatever it was that Cheyenne had given him. Assuredly not an eye. It is still glowing red, and he quickly flicks it to the ground. It sinks into the pavement and disappears, leaving only the faintest traces on the concrete.

Spider shows her his tiny, even teeth. "It's tragic, is it not, how misunderstandings can come between friends?" Cheyenne notices abstractly that his eyes are now a matching beady brown. They catch her, and she again feels an overwhelming need for a fix.

He shrugs. "But never fear. All's well that ends well. Just give me back my silver eye and I'll keep you in blow for the rest of your natural life."

A very small part of Cheyenne's brain asks, "How long will that be?" But she can hardly hear it. The need overwhelms all thoughts.

Before she can hand the silver eye to Spider, though, a small coyote emerges from the shadows behind him. It is blind in one eye, but the other is a familiar silver. It approaches her and very gently takes the orb in its jaws. When it turns to face Spider, he's gone. For a moment, Cheyenne thinks she sees a small insect scuttling on a nearby wall, but then that, too, disappears.

The urgent need for a fix remains, though. And thank God, Tommy still has Spider's dope. Cheyenne is just turning to him when she feels an agonizing pain. Worse than the withdrawal, worse than when she broke her arm when she was twelve, worse than anything.

"Fuck!" she gasps. She looks down. Nothing's touching her. The coyote appears to be simply sniffing her shadow, snarling softly at the broken pavement on which it falls. But she feels like something is chewing through an invisible arm. "Fuck!" she screams again.

She feels the last strands of whatever is being chewed give way and the coyote looks up. Immediately the pain dissipates, as quickly as it came. The coyote looks at her for a long moment, its luminous silver eye piercing her defenses as though they aren't there. Then slowly, soberly, it winks, before slinking off into the alleyway.

Cheyenne shivers once more out of habit, before realizing the shakes are gone. She breathes for a moment, cautiously, and finds that the nausea is gone as well. She is ferociously hungry and tired, but her body feels whole.

Tommy has somehow missed the conflict. As he probes his arm with the needle—the first fix of Spider's payment—he asks petulantly, "What's your problem? Why'd you give that silver thing to a dog? I bet we could have got another ounce from Spider for it."

Cheyenne doesn't answer. She briefly wonders if a puff will give her the calm to sell some of Spider's dope. But the thought of even a puff doesn't appeal. And as for Tommy... Well. No wonder it hurt when the coyote gnawed through that connection.

"Tommy," she says slowly, "I told you. I'm clean from now on. Are you in?"

"Yeah. Sure." He laughs. Smiles up at her. She'd know he was stoned even if she hadn't seen him shoot up. It's the only time he smiles at her these days. "You'll go back to making music." He puts his arms around her waist. For a moment she softens. But then he finishes: "I just don't want to waste the two ounces we have."

And then Cheyenne knows it. He's lost to her, and has been for months. Maybe since before they met. She feels a pang of sadness, but then that's gone too.

She leaves Tommy with his true love, holding the package with both hands.

As she walks down the street she thinks of that last glance the coyote shot her. Just like when Spider had the silver eye, it looked to the very center of her. But on the coyote it reflected what it saw. Cheyenne had met its gaze and seen something that wasn't so bad.

Pretty good, even. She's singing Cole Porter when she walks into the restaurant to buy dinner. •

Moebius Mice

Christian McPherson

Like running through a moebius strip-mall
or looking into a series of mirrors
producing self reflections to infinity:
everything has become a self parody

And when you try to point
with a discerning index finger
to all that is wrong
you end up with your own game show

Some say anarchy is the way
others just have a plastic virgin Mary
others say get back to nature
others just buy packaged beauty

And like that mouse on the wheel
it's hard to move with clichés
pulling you down
by your own tale of the truth

Sometimes to point
to all that which seems false
in a land of plastic trees
is to poke yourself in the eye

Like running through a moebius strip-mall
or looking into a series of mirrors
producing self reflections to infinity:
everything has become a self parody. •

*Canorko Petroleum was different.
From the moment the drill bit broke
ground, that company hummed,
brother. Seethed with life. And it didn't
want anybody turning out the lights...*

Company Man

Kevin Cockle

"THAT AIN'T THE STORY," SAID THE MAN KNOWN TO HIS followers as Queequeg, but whom I knew to be Tom Hallet, born and raised. He took an expansive drag on a joint, squinting at me as the smoke hit his lungs. It was a non-smoking, granola-crunching bar, but in the midst of Queequeg's people, nobody seemed to begrudge the old man a toke. The protesters were young, dressed in shorts and hiking boots, drinking, having a good time. A few were hard core types—Queequeg's lieutenants—but most were outside of his network. Nelly Furtado whined on the sound system. Queequeg looked to be thirty years out of date in this place.

"That's not the story?" I repeated. "You're Tom Hallet, former Senior VP at Canorko Petroleum, now the fabled corporate terrorist known as Queequeg, sworn enemy of globalization, and that's *not* the story?" I tried to picture the crew cut he once had; the big, black-rimmed glasses, but the image just wouldn't superimpose. Hallet had gone mountain—long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail, lupine face drawn, thin bitter lips that seemed to snarl as he talked, and arctic wolf-hound eyes, washed out and freakishly bright under the tired folds of aging lids. There was no trace of the beefy petroleum engineer the man had once been. It was as if he really had died in the fire, and been reborn as something completely else.

"Sure it sounds good." Queequeg seemed amused, voice throaty from the grass. " 'Queequeg Unmasked!' but that ain't it."

"Look, if you're afraid of the authorities, we can—"

"Man, I'll be long gone by the time this thing sees print."

"Well, what then? If your identity's not the story, what is? The cracking plant?"

"Yeah, you know, I guess so. Yeah, you could say the cracking plant's the story."

"The fire: you attempted to destroy the Canorko cracking plant during your tenure as director of operations, and disappeared during the blaze. Is that it?"

"No, man, you're missing it. The plant itself, that's kind of the story."

He had me there. I looked at the ashtray in front of him, saw the pile of ash, did some rough calculations and wondered how potted this guy really was. He saw me looking, saw me doing the math. He laughed, dry and low.

"I didn't light that thing up to cover my tracks," Queequeg said. That had been my thesis: that Tom Hallet had decided to embark on his vendetta by cutting all ties with his own corporate past, burning his old identity even as he destroyed a company icon, the Canorko Petroleum Cracking Plant #1. The plant had been shut down for years by the time of the arson anyway. You could still see its twisted silhouette against the prairie horizon, maintained like some kind of shrine by the company that had long ago absorbed Canorko: Forestal Industries Int'l. The sabotage had all the earmarks of symbolic destruction that would typify Queequeg's later career.

"Well, why do it then?" I asked. "The place was in mothballs. What did you have to gain?"

Queequeg smiled, leaning back in his sturdy wooden chair, and I didn't think he was going to say another word. But he swung forward, lit up another joint and looked me over as though he were in the mood to talk. I knew when to shut up in an interview. I just let him formulate, find his beginning. "You're not really ready for this," he said.

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" I replied.

But Queequeg was right.

A COMPANY, SAID QUEEQUEG, IS A LIVING, BREATHING, ACHING, EATING, SHITTING, growing thing. Take your corner grocer. Chinese-run joint, small, tidy, maybe a couple of aisles, shelves crammed to the ceiling with cans, detergent, cookies, bread, shit people need, shit they don't, magazine racks jammed with comics, *Newsweek*, porn—million different kinds of

chocolate bars and candies—crappy plastic toys for the kids. Business like that, it's alive in the way an insect is alive to us. Come ten o'clock, old man shuffles home—store gets a little bit sad, dormant. Eight o'clock the next day—old man slips the key in and turns on the juice, place gets a little bit happy—like a dog when its master returns. Old man keeps the store alive, and the store—it keeps him alive, just like an old couple sustaining each other down through the years. Nothing wrong with a business like that. But Canorko was different. From the moment the drill bit broke ground, that company *hummed*, brother.

Seethed with life. And it didn't want anybody turning off the lights.

"LET ME BACK UP A BIT," SAID QUEEQUEG, SEEING THAT HE'D LOST ME WITH the rant. The strain of trying to sound sane was obviously weighing on him. Don't forget, this was the same man who had once written, "We are all given subject positions by the economy. It changes us more than we change it; we are sublimated into being at the corporate level. *by the corporation itself*, in the very same way that a culture sublimates its art forms..." so he had a finely tuned knack for losing people. "I'll tell you about how I got the job in the first place," Queequeg offered, "give you something to hang on to." He continued with his narrative.

CANORKO PETROLEUM WAS FOUNDED IN THE FORTIES BY DAN NORRIS AND Jamie Kovacs, the "nor" and "ko" in Canorko. They were just a couple of wildcatting poker players out of Houston come North to try their luck in virgin territory. Down to their last nickel, Kovacs gets this impulse to drill just south of Turner Valley. Norris figures what the hell, and with the banks closing in on them, they strike oil. The second that elephant came in, Canorko started to breathe. That company just jumped out of the Turner mud as fast as the crude itself and those old boys barely knew what to do with it. For ten years, they had a tiger by the tail, rampaging from deal to deal without every really stopping to tie up loose ends, and by the end of the fifties, Canorko needed managers in a big way. I was the first full time college grad ever hired, and by 1960, Canorko had a new set of officers and a steady growth mandate for the future. Norris was president, Kovacs still CEO, but as director of operations, Canorko was my show. I say "my show," but of course at that point, I didn't know Canorko was its own show. It took me a while to see it, and once I saw it, to recognize it for what it was.

You see, I had moved my family, my wife and two kids, to Calgary to start up with Canorko. Things were just starting to cook. The oil patch back then and on into the seventies was just like the dot-com boom you grew up with. At some point, it became more than just rigs, oil and

money—there was energy to it as well. Life. Canorko wasn't the only one: there were hundreds of companies participating, and together they all pulsed with juice, feeding off each other, growing together. People like myself at the time, we went in expecting to be the captains, the guys who would take the industry forward, but it wasn't like that at all. We were more like the drones that kept the hive warm, kept the queen fed, but in no way, shape, or form were we steering that ship, brother.

Norris was still present at the office, like a rubber tree plant or crappy western painting—he was part of it. You could see he was the salesman—he had this big round head, round eyes, receding hairline, and you could hear his laugh down the hallway. Once he handed over the reins, he spent most of his time schmoozing with the typing pool—that was a... like a floor almost, of secretaries-in-waiting you had before computers. Anyway, the man was basically a figurehead at that point. But every once in a while, you'd go into his office and the phone would ring, and it would be Kovacs—or at least, I always thought it was Kovacs—and there would be a change in Norris for the creepier. He'd get this glazed look in his eyes and his smile would get rigid like it was just his face pulling back from his teeth. He'd nod, never say anything but "Uh huh," or "Yep," and hang up without so much as a "You take care." After witnessing a couple of these "conversations," I realized I must have been Kovacs' hire—Norris was just following orders like the rest of us. And nobody at the company had ever seen Jamie Kovacs in person.

Anyway, life was good. Canorko was the envy of every other E&P in town—we never put a foot wrong. Our finding and operating costs were the lowest on the street. We had no debt. And we never hit dry. You think about that for a moment. This was before 3D seismic: even if the geology of the area were favorable, odds were typically one in ten that you'd get wet. I remember thinking that we had been extraordinarily lucky, and that it couldn't last, but anyone who had really been paying attention could have seen that what we were doing went beyond sheer chance. And it always seemed to be that right before we found another elephant, Norris would get one of those phone calls from Kovacs.

Flash-forward about a year and half or so. I was doing an inventory of assets and facilities, being a good little drone, working with our auditors for the upcoming annual, and I noticed something strange. I had maintenance costs on the books that didn't seem to be accountable anywhere. I could see the expense, but I couldn't actually trace the money to anything in particular. I started to backtrack through our records, then I made calls out into the field, and that's how I found out about Cracking Plant #1.

See, the plant had been out of operation for years and had somehow

slipped through the cracks. It wasn't listed on any formal balance sheet after 1955, but once I had the period I was able to uncover a little history. It was the first major facility outside of corporate offices that Canorko had ever erected, the first sign that the company was going to be something substantial. That cracking plant was flesh and bone, meant to last. It wasn't going to just up and away like a rig when the job was done, and that's why Canorko built it. The company needed itself to be tangible. It was becoming real, and aware. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I pulled together what I'd found and went in to see Norris the next day. Obviously, someone had buried the plant and was siphoning off the maintenance money. I figured I'd get a hearty slap on the back and a nice bonus check for this one. But as Danny went through the report, the phone rang, and he picked it up. Death's head grin, vacant stare. He nodded and yep'd his way through the piece and hung up. Then he closed the folder and said, "We'll take it from here, Tom."

I didn't get it. "Don't you want me to..." I stammered.

"We'll take it. From here. Thanks Tom." I still remember the expression on his face—like the guy was made of wax. He didn't have to kick me in the ass on my way out; I knew that my report was being shelved, although I hadn't the foggiest notion why. If I had torn up the linoleum flooring, I would have seen the writhing scales of a giant snake slithering underfoot, but I still wasn't quite ready to know that stuff. Looking back though, that's where I should have started to piece things together.

That night—I think it was that night—I worked late. I was pissed, too damn angry to go home. Office was dark; I had one of those wire neck lamps on my desk and I was crunching through auditor's shit when I felt my door opening, knew it from the change in the background hum. I looked up and there was this tall, rangy cowboy with a tan Stetson and brown suit, string tie, all dressed for Stampede. He smiled, long face and big teeth reminding me of a horse for some reason. Of course I knew him; there was a portrait of him and Norris in Danny's office: it was Jamie Kovacs in the flesh.

I just stared like an idiot. Kovacs made the first move. He sauntered into my office and shook my hand, and right away I recognized the rigger's large hands and death-lock grip. He sat down, still grinning, and said, "Well, shit, Tom, don't look so surprised."

I had to laugh, "Mr. Kovacs," I said, "I mean..."

"Listen, I'm sorry I don't get up here more often." ("Up"? Like from down south? I didn't know.) "You've been doing a hell of a job, I just wanted you to know that. We couldn't be more pleased with the work you've been doing." Kovacs wasn't like Norris when it came to this sort of thing. If

Danny had been giving me this little pep talk, it would have been decibels louder, he would have been laughing, probably suggesting a trip over to Hy's for a scotch. Kovacs was friendly, but it was field-friendly. Real.

It must have shown on my face, the irony, because Kovacs picked right up on it. "The cracking plant. That especially, Tom, that was damn good stuff. I knew you'd find it."

That made no sense to me. If Kovacs had known something was amiss, why hadn't he done anything about it? Why wait for me to uncover it? He continued, "That plant's been a sore spot for years. I'm glad it's out in the open."

"But I thought you talked to Danny on it." I said, still a step behind.

"Nah. That wasn't me." Kovacs said. His smile dimmed just a little bit. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Kovacs got up and wandered out of my office. I jumped up and followed him. Down a darkened hallway, through the empty lobby, past the boardroom, we headed for Danny's office. Kovacs walked right in and it was strange because it was his office too, but I just couldn't associate it with him. I felt like we were breaking and entering, but he just wandered over to the bar, splashed a little scotch in a tumbler and walked over to the window. In those days, you could see out over the river to the Crescent Hill cliff. People were still alive that could remember that stretch wild. It was a hell of a view at the time.

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN TELEPATHY?" QUEEQUEG SUDDENLY ASKED ME. I BLINKED, yanking myself out of the 1960s office and back into the crowded blonde-wood bar.

"What?" I said.

"Telepathy. Images communicated direct from mind to mind. Do you believe that can be done?"

"Not as such, no."

"Well, we got a problem then." He took a massive drag, holding it in as he seemed to consider his next words carefully.

I CAN'T REALLY EXPLAIN THIS NEXT PART TO YOU, SAID QUEEQUEG, BUT I'LL give it a shot. I joined Kovacs at the window, looking at our reflections in the dark glass. He was just staring out into the night, sipping his scotch. I was trying to think of something to say when there was this sudden flash of light, like I was having a stroke or something and my brain was just blowing circuits.

And suddenly, I'm on a scrub plain, looking over heat-blistered rolling hills, and there's Danny Norris sitting on the runner of an old Ford

pickup, watching as Jamie Kovacs crouches to pick up a handful of good Turner dirt not ten yards away. Either I knew from photos, or from some other source, but this was the site of Canorko's first spectacular success. It wasn't quite like being there—you could sense the danger of the place, you could feel the wind whispering warnings, the subtle rustle of the grass and the tilt of the sky all screaming at those boys to move on, but of course they couldn't see that stuff. Legend has it Kovacs just knew the oil would be there, over-riding Danny's geologist's reports. This was the conversation that had turned Danny around.

Flash. Champagne bottles, black tie and tails. Danny pouring bubbly at the Palliser ballroom. Somebody had ridden a horse through the grand hotel's front lobby. You felt the euphoria. Norris and Kovacs clinking glasses as the good times finally start.

Flash. Deals. Papers. Rigs. Prairie. Storm clouds, tornado dark. Gushing gouts of oil. Hookers for Danny. Jamie taking his wife through the Hudson's Bay and buying her any damn thing she wants.

Flash. The cracking plant. Its twisted frame of pipe and metal causeways. Shabby by today's standards, it rises dark and hard against the sky. I can't make out any details against the heavy storm clouds—just points and jagged peaks along the edges of the thing. The plant doesn't *really* look like this, but the vision gives you more than just image to work with.

Flash. Danny and Kovacs deep within the plant. Wire cage lamps illuminate the cramped scene. In the shadows, writhing pipe runs and overlaps itself, creating the impression of movement in the walls. Pumps and valves, aorta and veins, the great iron heart of the thing, beating. Outside, the prairie wind howls, a storm wind. Inside, the place is boiling—both men are sweating, ties loose around tanned necks. Jets of steam lay off pressure, and the background din is deafening, like the engine-room of a great ocean liner. Like the *Titanic*. I know it's not really like that inside a cracking plant, but the vision says otherwise. Danny knows it then, Jamie knows it—Canorko is alive, and needy.

Norris pulls out his Smith and Wesson. Kovacs stares wide-eyed in shock before Danny gives it to him in the face. Norris' right cheek twitches as he stares for many moments at the crumpled frame of his friend, now sacrificed at the arcane direction of the company itself. Rust-brown blood pools out the back of Kovacs' skull, growing slowly across the concrete like panzer thrusts on a map. Blood pincers encircle dry patches on the floor, reduce pockets of resistance, then move on.

I think, or am made to think, of Mayan stone altars, blood channeled through ridges cut in rock, not wasted. Norris isn't finished: he's got a long night in front of him. He has to break through the concrete flooring, get

to the dirt beneath. It takes him hours. Finally he struggles to drag Kovacs' deadweight into the pit, and there, emerging through dirt, pipe pushes in from the sides and slowly wraps itself around the lifeless husk of the man who had sensed the oil in the first place. Thin copper tubing crunches into dry nostril, shlupping and gurgling horribly at the cooling juice inside.

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

I looked around. My legs were numb, my heart pounding. Norris' office was empty. The door was open and I distinctly noticed the odor of good scotch in the air, but there was no sign of Kovacs. It was all clear to me after the images had run through my brain what had happened, how the company had manifested itself, how it continued to work through Dan Norris like some hellish puppet master. And it was equally clear to me that I had indeed been Kovacs' hire all along. Somehow, in sustaining Canorko, something of Kovacs had remained alight as well. He could move throughout the company, drop his hints, make his visitations, all without Canorko realizing exactly what was going on. Not a ghost exactly: more like the subconscious of the company itself. He was a dream that Canorko kept forgetting.

And Kovacs had picked me to find the plant, picked me to see the visions, and knew that I would act.

I didn't pack much. Basically some cash, change of clothes, some tools. That and the truck were all I had. I never said goodbye to Cheryl or the kids, because if I had, I never would have gone through with the whole thing. And that's not your story either. What I felt, or feel now about them is none of your goddamn business. After seeing the images, I'd been changed from the inside out. Even if I had stayed. I'd have been a stranger to them.

I drove down to Turner that night, and even though I'd never been to the cracking plant, I went right there like I was going home. Now I could see. The hatred of the place. The malevolence of the steel. A storm was blowing in, but I had to go ahead. I realize now I should have used explosives, but I did the best I could, all things considered.

In all the years since, I've never been as shaky as I was that night, walking through that abandoned mass of metal, gas-canning every step of the way. Flashlight wasn't much use, really just hinting at what I couldn't see. Place was silent. Cold. Everything I did sent echoes in and out of the steel, threading through the spaces in the walls, and every once in a while I'd just stop, listen. Nothing moved when I looked directly at it, but it felt like the place was crawling in my peripheral vision—I kept expect-

ing pipe to lash out from the walls or come up through the floors at me. Probably have Kovacs to thank for keeping the place quiet—who knows? Life wasn't as visceral as it had been in the vision, but it was there all the same. I couldn't work fast enough. When the cans were empty, I just sent the place up—first time I'd ever torched anything. I remember seeing the fireball in my rearview mirror as I hightailed it over the hills.

And that was it.

I did damage, but not enough. With rain that night and quick response out of Turner, they managed to save the damn place. Saved it, and never found Kovacs' body in the basement. Canorko's gone the way of the dodo, but it lives on in the body of the huge concern that bought the guys that bought Canorko in the '80s. I hate to think of its power now. It can get into space on the backs of Forestal satellites. It can fabricate cruise missiles. And it has a board of directors who all answer the phone and grin the way Danny Norris once did.

QUEEQUEG SAT BACK WITH HIS HANDS BEHIND HIS HEAD, STARING AT ME WITH reflecting eyes. I couldn't believe he would bullshit me like this. "That's still not the story," Queequeg said.

"Come again?" I said. I should have said "check, please."

"That's background." Queequeg leaned forward with a wolfish leer. "You're the story."

"You might want to cut back on the doobage," I offered. But for all he had done, his eyes seemed clear.

"No, man, think about it. Who was your source? Who led you to me?"

No mystery there. I got a call from an editor at *Clean* magazine with a tip on the identity of the infamous Queequeg and an assignment. Although I hadn't worked for them before, my freelance stuff was fairly well-known and my proximity to the G8 conference made me ideal for the occasion. Even if the terrorist angle fell through, something would no doubt come up. It was a natural for me. I told Queequeg this.

"Well, you got nothing you can use," Queequeg concluded. "But now I know they know what became of Tom Hallet. You got *sent*, buddy. To me. I owe you."

Queequeg stood, shook my hand. He had a calloused grip. "Seriously," he said, "check your source." And with that, Queequeg drifted off into the crowd.

Anyway, it goes like this. When I got back to town, I got on the horn, did some web searches and came up with the following. *Clean* magazine is one of many periodicals published by Trident Communications. Trident in turn is part of a media empire called "Winston Corp." that

owns, among other things, rural newspapers throughout Canada and the US, radio stations, and cable TV affiliates. Although their financials are separate, it is with little difficulty that Winston Corp. can be found to be a wholly owned subsidiary of Forestal Industries Int'l, a sprawling diversified conglomerate with interests in electronic and print media, resources, aerospace, defence contracting, and obselete cracking plants in the middle of nowhere.

A quick consultation of the *Clean* magazine masthead will reveal another interesting tidbit. Under the title of "Assistant Editor" you will see the name Jamie Kovacs. I called, but could only access a voice messaging service for Mr. Kovacs. It's just as well. I don't think I ever want to hear that voice in person.

I've been obsessing on a few related themes since my talk with Tom Hallet. The idea that a little Calgary oil company with its genesis in a Turner Valley scrub-brush field could have become the sick heart of a gigantic, globe-spanning multi-national corporation never fails to send a thrill up my spine, and not in a good way. When I read Queequeg's writing on the internet, talking about the economy as a living organism that we service in some sort of symbiotic parasitical fashion, I realize he's not just spewing some kind of neo-marxist determinist dogma.

He really means the thing is some sort of alternate life form, like a giant snake in the walls that we can't, or won't see.

I've come to realize his sabotage targets—often pointless, out of the way installations that barely register in the popular press when they're gone—may in fact have been more significant than we know. I am not comforted by his analogy of the corner grocer and his harmless business. I buy my milk and get the hell out of there.

But most of all, I think about this: that in a *Clean* magazine database somewhere, they've got my name and number. I show up. I can be noticed, if, as, and when Canorko ever cares to look. I'm not going to kid you. I worry about that every single day. •

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Blackbirding

Wes Smiderle

THE RESIDENTS OF BEACON POINT CALLED THEM "SPOOK lights"—bright, diamond-shaped spectral flashes that hovered nightly above the waters of Crippler's Bluff. Some dismissed the eerie phenomenon as "swamp gas." Others suggested it was UFOs, but most agreed the lights possessed a distinctly supernatural quality. Concerns that the morbid gossip might adversely affect Beacon Point's summer season prompted town council to call in the government experts. After a long weekend of careful observation, studying and calculating, the experts theorized the spook lights were caused by seismic or tectonic stresses creating an electric charge. The experts called it "the piezo-electric effect," and they were completely wrong.

It was the stranger's arrival that triggered the spook lights, although the sleepy cottage residents of the Point had no earthly means of knowing this. The man arrived quietly and very early in the season, otherwise his presence would have no doubt drawn more stares and sparked a frenzy of gossip.

Owen Sweetman in Unit 63 and Ed and Fran in Unit 44 were some of the few who lived in the Point year-round and were thus the only ones who caught a glimpse of the stranger's arrival. He was tall and thin with a complexion, as Fran later reported, "pale as a porch-lit moth."

Ed and Fran had watched from behind the lace curtains in their breakfast

nook as the stranger paused briefly underneath the twenty-foot wooden sign announcing: *Welcome to Beacon Point—Emerald Jewel of Lake Erie*. One side of the sign leaned crooked, as though about to stumble drunkenly and topple to the ground. After a brief glance upward, the stranger continued strolling past the long line of beach-front cottages, Ed and Fran's among them.

Still peering from behind the curtains, both Ed and Fran guessed the man had spent much of his journey on foot. He was small and walked with a careful earnestness that was almost childlike. His black boots were faded to gray and the fabric of his heavy pea coat was threadbare. They watched him continue down the sandy road. After an appropriate pause, Ed stepped out on the porch and watched the stranger until he reached the cramped, two-room cabin out near the end of the Point, right next to the provincial park campgrounds.

Already tainted by association with tent-bound campers, the small cottage was an ugly, dilapidated structure with phony brick-board siding and a faulty water system that would unleash the reek of dead mouse and metal deposits up through the faucets without warning. The cottage was known as "The Occasional" among Point residents because no one ever rented the place for more than a single season.

After fiddling with the no doubt rusted front door lock, the stranger vanished inside the cabin. Ed turned back inside to report his findings to Fran, who still lurked behind the kitchen curtains. Ed didn't like the look of that pea coat (sailors were always bad news). Fran suggested the man was here fleeing a love that had reached an untimely and tragic end. They both promptly forgot about the issue with the arrival of those annoying Robertson girls across the road in Unit 38. Bet anything those willful, spoiled little brats use the yard as a shortcut to the beach every afternoon again. Ed grumbled, Fran seethed.

It was nine days later when that first spectral light appeared for Owen Sweetman on the waters of Crippler's Bluff.

OWEN HAD ALSO NOTICED THE STRANGER'S ARRIVAL, BUT PAID LITTLE NOTICE AT FIRST.

He was busy docking his twenty-foot Lyman Islander runabout after a morning's excursion around the Bluffs. It was an old cruising boat lined with smooth mahogany and built in the mid-fifties, custom made with a proper ship's wheel. Owen had bought the craft ten years ago and re-christened it the *Alexander*, although he could never bring himself to actually use the name.

He was tying off the docking lines when he happened to catch sight of the pale, diminutive stranger through the spruces. He watched the man shake drizzle from his coat and then slip inside the questionable shelter of the Occasional.

Owen experienced an unpleasant bout of *déjà vu*, but then immediately forgot about the man's existence. He returned his attention to his boat and a moldy old gunny sack filled with his latest finds from wading through the many shallow sandbars that littered the bay around Beacon Point and Lake Erie in general. He had found a rusted compass and a cracked, silt-covered coffee mug encrusted with zebra mussels. Owen hoped these were remnants from the wreck of a schooner called the *Conductor*, but it was much too soon to tell.

Owen finished tying down the runabout, threw the gunny sack over one shoulder and returned to his cottage. He was followed closely by Abigail, his perpetually soaked purebred Standard Poodle. Owen had first brought the large, curly-haired dog out on his excursions because she liked chasing ducks, but the animal had soon proved invaluable.

"She's got a nose for wrecks," he liked to tell friends and, more frequently, the occasional reporter who came by to write about the historical significance of his latest find.

Owen had been living in Beacon Point year-round for almost a decade. The small port served as a summer home for him and his family for longer than that—since before the divorce, before his marriage and before everything else.

The Point was nestled at the base of a slender, twenty-mile length of sandbars that thrust eastward in a sickle-shaped branch into Lake Erie. The sands created a wide bay and a natural shelter for passing vessels from Erie's often chill and temperamental waters. Owen had been coaxed there long ago by the sleepy town's colorful past. The sedate rows of painted cottages were constructed on a foundation of wild history involving pirates, rumrunners, quicksand, slavery, hurricanes, shipwrecks and even buried treasure.

Owen's current prey was one of an endless parade of nineteenth century ships and schooners that had sailed into the Point's gentle peninsula carrying vital shipments of coal, lumber, salt and stone to lakeside villages around the region. Most such ships sailed in, sold their cargo and departed safely. The *Conductor* had managed to dock and sell its cargo but then somehow fell ill of Crippler's Bluff on its way out of the bay. The idea of adding her bones to his collection gave Owen a vague sense of relief.

He had been searching the bay every morning for weeks, since the last chunks of ice had melted away. Encouraged by his discovery of the compass and mug, he started scouring the waters every night and soon forgot all about the scrawny little man who had moved in next door.

It was several nights after the stranger's arrival when Owen first saw the spook light. He was peering through a gunny sack full of new encourag-

ing discoveries. Abigail, her nose normally pointed directly to the water's surface, actually saw the glow first.

The sky was clear. The stars were milky and the moon was almost full, giving the quiet water the look of liquid steel. The only sound was the creak of a bullfrog from shore. Abigail, standing diligently at the runabout's prow, caught her master's attention with a low bark, like a tap on his shoulder. Owen looked up from the sack, annoyed at the disturbance.

"What?"

And there it was, less than an oar's length from his face. A soft smear of light barely a meter above the water's placid surface. The angular glow was surrounded by a spidery, shimmering halo of faint green. It flashed three times in a slow and gentle cycle, almost a wink. Owen had difficulty ascertaining its size. He had difficulty looking anywhere but into the warm light, which seemed to radiate against his cheeks like the rays of sun on a brilliant, awful summer afternoon a bit more than ten years ago when he and his wife listened to the police officer explain the details of Alexander's suicide. His gut ached at the memory. There was deep longing and loneliness in that light. There was regret.

Time passed and it was over. The glow was gone and he was left with the distinct impression that it was the light—not him—that had finally turned its attention elsewhere.

Owen cruised the remaining distance back to shore at low speed, his gaze straying back to the point where the light had been. He docked his runabout in a daze and returned home, so stunned he forgot his gunny sack, and the precious treasures inside, at the bottom of the boat.

He was the first Beacon Point resident to see a spook light, but never told anyone about the encounter. Soon cottagers would be catching sight of clusters of spook lights every night, sometimes as many as eight or nine at once. Owen only ever saw a single light at a time, and it wasn't until later that he figured out why.

The day after that first sighting, he received a visit from his new neighbor.

OWEN WOKE EARLY, GASPING FREE FROM AN OLD NIGHTMARE. HE STARED AT THE ceiling for several seconds before the past ten years caught back up to him with a sigh that lapsed into a dull groan.

He drifted through the morning feeling cold and hollow. His daily habits melted into watery confusion and indifference. He walked out to the dock, looked at his runabout, and then wandered back inside with Abigail padding after him, whining. He wanted to cry, but could only yawn.

He couldn't bring himself to go out into the bay to resume his regular morning search for the *Conductor*, not even just for the serenity of being

on open water. The weather made a convenient excuse. The sky was a sulky patchwork of white and gray. Last night's drizzle had swollen to become a miserable downpour. It was almost May, but the air still ached with an early spring chill that had yet to thaw.

The morning melted away. Owen meandered to the food market (closed), then had a cheeseburger and beer at the Chip Wreck to calm his nerves. It didn't work and on the way back he ran into Ed and Fran who quizzed him briefly—but ferociously—about his “queer neighbor.” Owen couldn't tell them much, so they dropped the subject and prattled on instead about a pair of girls who were apparently using their back yard like a public picnic area. An hour later, he left them still chattering.

He trudged back home and turned on the television, but didn't watch a second of it. He allowed the noise and light to fill his cottage like a lamentation while he sat at his kitchen table and fumed silently. At some point he realized—so suddenly it gave him a violent jolt—that he couldn't bear human contact.

What was left of the sun had finally dipped beneath the treetops when he heard a knock at the door. He tried ignoring it but the weak rapping was persistent. He opened the door and was greeted with a small knot of darkness. Somehow only a narrow sliver of light managed to spill out from the doorway and onto the porch. He saw a face pale like a dead moon floating in the murk.

Owen squinted through the shadows. “Yes?”

The man stepped forward slightly and Owen recognized him immediately as the stranger who had moved into the Occasional next door. The man somehow looked even smaller and more frail than he remembered, almost buried in a mass of baggy black jeans, a heavy wool sweater and a bulky, double-breasted wool pea coat. He shook Owen's hand and introduced himself as Beaupré.

“Come in,” Owen said immediately, inexplicably. “Please.”

He guided Beaupré to the den, offered him a seat and turned off the television. He had just started to sit down himself when it occurred to him to offer Beaupré some tea. He left the room without waiting for a response and returned with two steaming cups. They both sat and drank quietly while Owen suddenly wondered what the hell the odd visitor was doing here. Beaupré seemed quite content to sit there and drink tea all night without explaining himself.

After a couple of fitful starts, Owen asked, “So how do you like Beacon Point?”

Beaupré stared blankly as though the name meant nothing to him. Eventually something seemed to click and he nodded, a bland smile

forming like a bloodless gash across his face.

"Beacon Point," he said. "Yes, it's lovely. Lovely beach. Lovely weather. Lovely."

Owen stared back, completely perplexed. The Point had been suffering nothing but miserable weather for almost two weeks. The beach was still filled with trash.

Beaupré unexpectedly reciprocated by asking him what he did for a living. Owen explained he lived at the Point permanently, was more or less retired, and spent his days cruising around the bay and Lake Erie in general.

Somehow his mouth wouldn't stop working and Owen found himself boasting about the various wrecks he had discovered over the past ten years or so. He talked about his mildly famous six-year search for the *State of Atlanta*, during which he scoured a mind-numbing 550 square miles of lake floor. He had recovered over a dozen other wrecks including a 120-year-old schooner, several small tugs and a massive rusted whaleback hull that had lain buried in mud for seventy years like a metal leviathan. He also stumbled across a 100-foot long sailing vessel eventually identified as the *Kennedy*, an old rumrunner from the Prohibition days whose sinking had caused a virtual tide of whiskey bottles to wash up along Beacon Point for weeks afterwards.

Owen knew these should be fairly interesting stories, yet he found himself blathering endlessly over meaningless details like the intricacies of side scan sonar and the endless varieties of current shift that could sometimes occur as deep as eighty meters below Lake Erie's moody surface. During the whole diatribe Beaupré sat quietly and unblinking, like a rare and patient specimen of shark.

Owen was horrified to discover his wretched monologue was unstoppable. Words tumbled forth like water pouring into his own personal verbal shipwreck. He found himself talking about his ex-wife and the divorce proceedings that had lumbered forth like a miserable epilogue to his son's wake. After the divorce, he quit his job as an investment banker, sold his Toronto home and moved permanently to Beacon Point where he trawled waters in his old runabout using a small electronic box to hurl sound waves at Lake Erie's bottom and then catching the echoes that bounced back. Last he had heard, he added with a final watery grin, his ex-wife had moved to Vancouver and was studying law. Owen ran out of words and, mercifully, fell silent.

Beaupré took a contemplative sip from his remaining drops of tea.

"You know these waters well, then?" he asked, apparently quite uninterested in old marital problems.

Assuming the small man was mocking him, he stared at the floor and flexed his hands with embarrassment.

"Ah," he admitted. "Well, yes. I suppose I do. There's others, though, who no doubt have spent just as—"

"Because I happen to be looking for something myself," Beaupré continued, as though he hadn't received any response at all. "It's why I came here, actually. I saw your dock with that fine old runabout and I supposed, well... I expect you would be an ideal resource to help me find it."

"You're looking for a ship?" he asked, surprised.

Beaupré ignored the question. "Mister Sweetman, are you familiar with the term 'blackbirding'?"

Owen nodded. He had come across the word often while sifting the archives on some of the older shipwrecks he had uncovered.

"It's an old robber technique from a hundred years ago," he said. "The brigands wait for a good stormy night and then set up a flashing light somewhere along shore, mimicking the beacon of a lighthouse. The light lures a passing ship to inadvertently beach itself against the shoal. The robbers wait patiently for calmer weather so they can wade out to the shoal, knives ready, and kill any poor buggers left on the boat. Then the robbers plunder the vessel and pick all the bodies clean."

Beaupré offered a sharp nod. "That's the local use of the term, but there's a much broader use as well. Blackbirding refers primarily to the enslaving of South Pacific or African natives, usually by force or deception, for work at sugar and cotton plantations in Australia and the United States. It was a common practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but continued to occur for many years afterwards in some very unexpected places."

"You mean... here? Beacon Point?"

Again, Beaupré answered while somehow seeming to ignore the question. "There was a ship full of 'blackbirds,' ignorant natives taken from a South American coastal village. Besides people, the hull was also filled with gold when it foundered and sank out on Crippler's Bluff in 1844 while trying to seek shelter in Beacon Point during a storm. I have the information and the wreck's probable location. You do the diving. We split the plunder. You agree?"

Owen nodded, mesmerized.

Beaupré placed his empty teacup on the table and carefully explained where exactly he wanted him to search.

OWEN WAS ABOUT TEN MILES INTO CRIPPLER'S BLUFF WHEN HE SAW THE SPOOK light a second time.

He was refining the image on a hazy bulk he'd picked up with the side scan sonar at seventy meters deep—what he hoped was Beaupré's blackbirding wreck. He felt much better after the inexplicable misery of yesterday. Being out on the water helped. Meeting Beaupré had also helped, although Owen wasn't sure why. On his first casual sweep days ago, the sonar uncovered a vaguely bread-shaped mass. He was re-sweeping the area, increasing the sound pulses from 100 to 250 kHz, when he saw the sparkling diamond of light again.

It was much further away than during his first encounter but the shimmering green halo, and the unnatural aura of lonely warmth that emanated from it, were unmistakable.

Owen returned home feeling confused and lost. Unlike after the first sighting, he woke the next morning with an actual craving to return to the bluffs. He did so repeatedly, sometimes spending all night completing his sonar scans around the same area. Each night he saw the same light—sometimes far and sometimes close, but always triggering the same gut-wrenching feeling of miserable nostalgia. Gradually the feeling became less debilitating and he soon began to look forward to the encounters.

The sighting took a darker turn late one night after several weeks of sonar scans and spook lights. Visibility was near zero. Fog curled over the waters and around the runabout like a thick, gray curtain. Thin shafts of moonlight filtered through to create a flat, unnatural light that illuminated nothing and seemed to actually thicken the fog. Owen couldn't see two feet beyond the bow.

He had stopped to take more sonar readings. The water was calm as glass, but the visibility was so bad he was considering spending the night on the runabout until the fog bank lifted.

He was gazing wearily at the neon green dots and waves cluttering the sonar screen when Abigail perked up her long ears and let loose her characteristic warning bark. Seconds later Owen could hear a faint, rhythmic sloshing of water. He leaned over the stern and peered out into the fog. The sound grew louder, coming closer. The splashing was steady like a pair of legs, or several pair, marching towards the boat, seemingly from nowhere.

As the sound grew more distinct he could hear breathing as well. A steady exhale of air sounding thick and glassy. Abigail offered another low bark which turned into a slow and steady growl. She curled her lip slightly, revealing one white fang, and pointed her nose port side. Owen dipped below deck and re-appeared with a long hooked pole. It was the closest thing he had to a weapon. The sound was booming now, echoing all around as though in a gymnasium. Finally he saw a rippled shadow, broad and bulky, surfacing up from the fog.

When the violent gasping and splashing sounded as though it was pounding directly on top of the boat, the fog curled away to reveal a large buck, immersed right to its massive shoulders, swimming frantically towards them. Tendrils of fog still seemed to cling to the creature's mighty rack of antlers. The buck's eyes were wide with feral panic and hardly seemed aware that it was on a collision course with the runabout. Owen clutched his pole uselessly, paralyzed with astonishment.

Fifteen-pointer at least, Owen thought dully.

At the last moment the buck swerved away from the boat and continued churning, swallowed up by the fog as quickly as it appeared. Owen listened to the swimming grow more faint as the boat bobbed violently beneath his feet in the buck's wake. Abigail was barking furiously and had been doing so since the buck first appeared.

"Abby," he said sharply.

The large dog went silent. Owen sat down, confused and vaguely nervous. The fog bank was dissipating slightly, as though the swimming buck and its spiky antlers had torn apart the fabric holding it together. Owen turned on the engines and steered the runabout to Beacon Point, cruising very slowly. It occurred to him that the buck had been going the same direction.

Not five minutes after starting the engines, Owen saw a dim shape in the fog that made his knees buckle. Anyone else might have mistaken it for a chunk of driftwood, but he recognized it as a young man floating in the water, perched sidesaddle on a lengthy stump of birch tree. Being trapped this far out on the lake was essentially a death warrant, but Owen did not cut his engines. He actually sped up slightly.

The boy on the log turned and reached towards the boat. His features were indistinct in the gloom.

HE TALKED WITH BEAUPRÉ THE NEXT NIGHT. BY NOW, THE ENTIRE TOWN WAS BUZZING with tales about the spook lights. The two men met beneath the crooked Beacon Point welcome sign. They spoke in darkness, murmuring like two Cold War spies. Owen showed him print-outs of the sonar readings.

"It's down there," he said. "You can even see the two masts, still upright."

Beaupré seemed pleased. "Tomorrow you dive."

Owen hesitated and then told him about his encounter with the large buck and the boy adrift on the log. Beaupré's black eyes remained smooth and indifferent. After a longer hesitation, Owen told him about his dead son, Alexander. Shy and introverted, Alexander had constantly complained about hearing sounds and voices. The doctors called it schizophrenia and it got worse when the boy hit his teens. His mother had wanted to place

him in a hospital but Owen remained convinced he was better off at home, or surrounded by the peacefulness of the summer cottage. One day ten years ago, Alexander complained the voices were telling him about a deer. Later that night, the boy swam out into the Bluffs on a birch log, chasing the deer and the voices. They never found his body.

"That was my son Alexander," said Owen, almost choking as he spoke the name aloud. "I saw my—my dead son."

Beaupré's eyes shined quietly. He shrugged. "Tomorrow you dive," he said. "Your delusions are not my concern. Remember the gold."

Owen remembered the gold, but again he slept poorly. Not counting his brief search of the sandbar, tomorrow night would be his first dive since last fall.

THERE WAS A CLUMSY SPLASH AS THE WATER SWALLOWED HIM IN A COLD SHOCK.

He floundered briefly before sinking beneath the surface. Even through his wet suit, the chill sank right down to his bones. Moonlight filtered from above in a feeble trickle of light. There was something unsettling about giving one's self up to any body of water and Lake Erie was no different.

He took to the depths in a slow spiral, unclipping his flashlight and casting a beam below. He was still amazed at how clear the lake waters had become since the zebra mussel first hitched a ride into this ecosystem years ago. If all was well—if he and Beaupré were right—the wreck should be about seventy meters directly below his flippers.

After many minutes of gentle kicking, he caught sight of rock and debris. He had reached the mudline. He checked his GPS and then swam lazily to the east, sweeping the wide beam of his flashlight. He could hear nothing but the bubbles from the air tank and his own breathing. He inhaled and exhaled strong and steady, reassured by the pressure of the cold water wrapped around his body. It was a soothing and peaceful place. He'd missed being here.

The first thing he noticed were the fishing nets, coated with silt and strewn across the sediment. He followed the path of torn nets with his flashlight beam until it lead to him to a looming, breathtaking bulk. A two-masted schooner, half-pounded into the lake floor. Judging by the profile, Owen guessed it had sunk bow first. He traced his light the length of the hull, back and forth. Wide holes and rips in the aft suggested the boat had collided with another vessel before plunging to its doom.

As he approached, Owen saw the entire stern was veiled with more netting. If the water wasn't so clear, he would have had a hell of a time moving around without getting stuck. While passing the nets, he was startled briefly by a four-foot catfish with a mean mustache of sharp

whiskers. It snaked within an inch of his face. Otherwise he threaded his way around the hull with ease.

Everything was covered in an orange-green layer of silt and mud, thick as cake. He found the tiller arm cracked roughly in two along the aft deck. He found the off-set centre board. He found a wooden-barreled, double-action bilge pump. He found two steering wheels collapsed on either side of the hull.

And he found the gold.

Tucked in a small room with a large boiler rusted pale red, but perfectly intact except for a crack at the bottom where he saw a stick—no, a human hand sticking out. A corpse in the boiler? Owen ignored it. The gold was laid out in front of the boiler on some kind of wooden beam. The treasure lay in a heap on one end of the beam, glittering white and pale. Scrubbed clean by 150 years, and the zebra mussels.

Owen was unfastening the gunny sack from his belt when the pile of gold suddenly lifted up off the beam, quivering like a school of fish and then twisting to face him full on and... Christ, it wasn't gold at all. It wasn't a wooden beam. It was a person—unmasked and without a wet suit. Dressed in old pants, an old black pea coat and lying stretched out in the boiler room of a sunken schooner with a face pale like gold. Now facing Owen calmly, over seventy meters below the surface of Lake Erie. No oxygen, no suit. Smiling serenely and studying him with those sweet black eyes. Dangerous and innocent, like an animal. Or a demon.

"Hello, Mister Sweetman."

The lips moved, but no air bubbles came out. Owen could 'hear' the words in his head. He could not believe this. He wanted to wake up, but couldn't. He waited for the illusion to vanish, but it didn't. Was he oxygen-deprived? Maybe hallucinating? He checked the gauge on the air-tank and everything seemed okay but obviously it wasn't or he wouldn't be seeing hallucinations so he prepared for a rapid ascent and hoped—

But Beaupré reached out a hand. "You'll be staying here a little longer, I'm afraid. We had an agreement."

It was then that Owen saw the flashing light a third and final time. It emerged from the depth of the boiler room looking less bright than before. The dull ball of light halted somewhere behind Beaupré and was soon joined by another flash of light. And another. And then another. Soon the boiler room was aglow with tight, white diamonds, bobbing in the water like a cluster of giant pearls. Somehow, Owen knew none of these were the light he had seen over the past few weeks. He would recognize that one on sight.

Owen turned back to Beaupré but was unable to speak. It didn't seem

to matter.

"Do you like my little treasures?" Beaupré asked, with a careless gesture back to the lights. "You'll be joining them soon enough..."

Owen leaped backwards with a fierce kick, scrambling away from the broken boiler and almost losing his mask on a piece of overhanging netting. He was almost clear of the schooner's hull when Beaupré appeared from above. He shot through the water with little effort, like a twisty length of black oil. He stopped in front of Owen, blocking him.

Near mad with panic, Owen looked back at the wreck. Although obscured slightly, he could see most of the painted lettering on the stern was still visible. He reached over and wiped some of the silt away with a trembling hand.

BEA PRÉ

"You're on my boat now, Mister Sweetman."

The glowing lights were gathered around him now, their diamond glow muted to a dull shine. Except for one, floating within arm's reach with its faint green glow. That was the one. The light he had seen repeatedly over the past few weeks.

"I've collected a nice group over the years, don't you think?" Beaupré continued, gesturing to the bobs of light, which all seemed to tremble and flicker at the sound of his voice. "The problem is, people aren't dying on these bluffs like they once did. I need more. My master needs more. Consequently, I must resort to base chicanery as I have done with you. As I also did years ago with your son."

And then Owen suddenly understood. The light with the green halo—that was Alexander. The realization filled him with a paradoxical sense of relief.

"What's wrong, Sweetman?" Beaupré asked, sneering. "You don't believe me?"

But he did believe him. In fact, his heart pounded with a joy he hadn't known since before Alexander died, alone, in these waters. Now Owen might be able to ensure his decade spent combing the lake had some point after all.

He kicked back towards the wreck and the boiler room. Beaupré and the spheres followed—still mute, still observing—while Owen unhooked the hatchet from his belt and brought it down hard on the rounded corner of the boiler, sending it crumbling into thick jagged pieces. He saw Beaupré approaching, screaming, but the demon was too late.

They were free.

A cluster of corpses—old, withered and gray—burst from the boiler, popping up through the waters like stiff lengths of cordwood. The

bodies didn't float far before they began to crumble and dissolve as though made of ash. Beaupré clutched at them wildly, but to no avail.

As the corpses disintegrated, the group of lights brightened and shot free of the wreck, as though suddenly unleashed by whatever hold Beaupré had on them. Owen watched the bright points of light dance away in crazy curlicues, hurtling towards the water's surface.

He then turned to see something was left in the boiler—a coffin resting at the bottom. It was marked BEAUPRÉ, the letters engraved in a copper plate on one end of the pine box.

Owen could feel the demon's cold presence bearing down on him but he ignored it and hammered away at the coffin with his hatchet and then, when he dropped the hatchet, with his fists until the box burst open.

As Beaupré's dead hands finally closed all around him, he couldn't help but smile.

IT'S POSSIBLE NO ONE AT BEACON POINT WOULD EVER HAVE KNOWN OWEN Sweetman's fate if it wasn't for Abigail.

The dog was seen days after her master's disappearance, paddling towards shore with a rotten chunk of silt-covered mast clutched in her teeth. A forensics expert from up north dated the wood as at least 150 years old. Sweetman's runabout was never found, although pieces eventually washed up on some rocks on the western edge of the Point.

The conclusion was obvious and everyone in the Point started talking before police even had a chance to release a report—Owen Sweetman was killed on another one of his crazy shipwreck expeditions. Point gossip was in a frenzy, so much so that everyone forgot to ponder the spook lights that had appeared and then disappeared without explanation.

Abigail, soaked and exhausted, was adopted eagerly by the Robertson girls, who cared for the dog and continued using Ed and Fran's yard as a public picnic area. Perhaps it was no coincidence that they were the first to see the spook light again.

It happened well over a month after Owen Sweetman's disappearance. The girls were playing with Abigail on the sandbar not far out from the Beacon Point beach. The sun was setting behind a sky thick with moist clouds giving the air a soft, purple grain. The bright white light appeared with no warning, bouncing playfully over the waves and around a barking Abigail before dancing further out to deeper waters and then winking out altogether.

After that, spook light sightings resumed as though they'd never stopped. However, this time the tone of the encounters was different. Firstly, they only ever involved one light and it appeared during the day

more often than at night, usually revealing itself to groups of people.

Soon stories began circulating around Lake Erie of reckless captains running afoul of Crippler's Bluff, but then being led to safe passage by "a phantom lantern." There was never an air of panic to the reports. Some even assumed it was a high-tech guidance system for navigating the bluffs.

Beaupré—or what Beacon Point residents would have identified as "the stranger staying in the Occasional"—was never seen again. Not that anyone noticed. However, around the same time the bits and pieces of Owen Sweetman's runabout were washed ashore, a badly decomposed body was fished from the shallows of Crippler's Bluff. The flesh of the deceased was black as charred wood and so old it appeared mummified. At first authorities assumed it was a drowning victim stuck in the weeds for years. Forensics later placed the age closer to 150 years. They theorized the corpse had possibly lain sealed in a box or coffin for most of that time until something had disturbed its resting place. A passing boat maybe, or possibly just the shifting currents.

Owen's ex-wife returned briefly to the Point—her first appearance there since her son's death ten years ago. She came to make funeral arrangements and recover mementos of both her son and ex-husband. Many residents stopped to offer her condolences of varying degrees of sincerity. Ed and Fran were just callous enough to note they had always warned Owen how dangerous those Erie waters could be. The remark left the widow unruffled. She merely offered them a lonely smile and replied that considering how much Owen had loved both their son and the waters surrounding Beacon Point, perhaps this wasn't such a tragic ending after all. •

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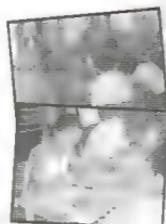
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The hominid brain finds patterns in chaos. That's what it's for. Even if Hector had no connection with the man, his brain should have invented one...

The Science of Forgetting

Steven Mohan, Jr.

HECTOR NEUMANN LIKED TO PLAY A PRIVATE LITTLE GAME with his ghost called “Guess what I was.” It wasn’t very smart, but somehow he couldn’t ever bring himself to stop.

One look at the nude sunbather proved he hadn’t been a woman. She was perfect in every detail: elegant features, small, nicely rounded breasts, slim legs, tawny hair spread out over the sand like a fan. His response—a suddenly dry mouth and an uncomfortable tightening in his shorts—was characteristically male. While the somatic shift from female to male was trivial, Hector doubted he could’ve learned male sexual behavior after decades of being a woman had been hardwired into his brain.

He looked away. Nuahu, the resort’s manager, didn’t like staff ogling the guests. Hector glanced over at a tourist sitting in the beachside cafe, his back to the bar, staring out at the calm blue water of Trilobite Cove. Something about the man frightened him, though he couldn’t say for sure what it was. From a distance, Hector detected nothing unusual. The

man was of medium height and build with skin dark enough that he should've been comfortable in Procyon's late morning glare instead of sheltered beneath the cafe's composite-reinforced palm frond roof.

The tourist wore black swim trunks and a matching smart jacket unzipped to reveal a muscular chest. He shifted on his stool and took a sip of a tall, clear drink accented with a lime. Hector couldn't quite see his face.

Then the tourist turned and he could.

The man was totally unfamiliar, which raised the hair on the back of Hector's neck. The hominid brain finds patterns in chaos. That's what it's for. Even if Hector had no connection with the man, his brain should have invented one.

The young boy dancing in the frothy white surf summoned up distant echoes of forgotten childhood friends; the naked goddess sunning herself sparked delicious hints of past couplings; but the man at the bar was a total blank, a stone cold nothing, as if Hector had instructed the previous him: *Don't remember the man with cinnamon skin overlaying a fine-boned Caucasian face framed by short black hair.* Lack of recognition implied history. To be excised, one had to have been there in the first place.

Of course Hector couldn't remember where he was from, but he did know he'd run far enough away to avoid chance encounters with former associates. This man had to be looking for him. This man had to be his watcher.

The man looked up and their eyes met. Hector almost flinched. He raised his eyebrows and smiled, hoping the watcher had missed the flicker of fear. He probably hadn't. Noticing things like that was what watchers did.

The man smiled back, flashing even white teeth. He pushed his glass toward the bartender, stood, and stepped out of the cafe's shade.

Hector looked away.

His pulse pounded in his ears. What could the watcher want? Vengeance? Justice? The man you seek is dead, Hector thought. I crept up on him in the neocortex and killed him while he slept.

He looked for the watcher's control. There were plenty of candidates: the bartender, the couple sharing an intimate lunch in the cafe, the naked sunbather, one of the people swimming in the cove, even the little boy playing in the surf might be a puppet clone. It could be any of them. Or all of them. Or none of them.

You're losing it, Hector. Calm down.

He glanced at the blurry approximation of his features reflected in the glass tank on the counter top. Sandy hair, green eyes, pale skin. He

frowned. It didn't matter what he looked like, as long as it was different.

The hominid brain learns to see by peering at its mother's face. Facial features are the key to visual recognition. Hector told himself. The watcher won't recognize the ghost through the mask of the new man's face.

"Hello."

Hector turned toward the easy baritone voice, his face frozen in a grin. The man's eyes were so brown they were almost black. "Good morning."

"Your name is Neumann, isn't it?" The watcher pronounced it in the American manner: *New-mun*.

Hector reached out with the extra sense culled from the DNA of certain migratory birds. He felt no break in the gentle pressure of the planet's magnetic field, saw no sign the man was using electronic devices. Apparently, any information the watcher gathered would be filtered through genetically-enhanced senses and stored in his photographic memory.

Hector nodded without correcting the mispronunciation. "What can I do for you?"

The man's handshake was firm, his touch cool. He smelled of gin. "Dinesh Banerjee." The man jerked his head toward the water. "Do you ever swim in the ocean?"

Hector suppressed a shudder. The cove was only four meters deep and he knew all its creatures intimately. The ocean was vast, limitless, and full of unknown terrors. Hector hated not being able to see the bottom. "No."

Banerjee's forehead wrinkled. "Why not?"

"I prefer the cove."

"Tell me about the cove, then."

Hector glanced out at the graceful arc of water shielded from the ocean's breaking whitecaps by coral. The sight calmed him. "When Osiris was Terraformed, the biologists could've created a modern biosphere." He shook his head, letting awe touch his voice. "Instead they recreated creatures extinct for millions of years..."

"There really *are* trilobites."

Hector nodded. "Three species in this cove alone."

Banerjee folded his arms and stared at him with those dark eyes. Didn't the man ever blink? "They've resurrected a forgotten past."

Forgotten past. The words sliced through Hector's shaky composure like a knife. He nodded. Nod, nod, nod. *That* had to look natural. He tapped the tank sitting on the counter. "Care to see for yourself?"

Banerjee frowned. "I'm not sure. The past can be dangerous."

Hector tasted bile. The watcher was trying to rattle him, push him into

revealing something. He fought the maddening need to drum his fingers on the counter.

"It's not too bad. The most dangerous organism in the cove is a freshwater shark the size of a dogfish."

Banerjee raised an eyebrow. "Fresh water?"

An open-ended question.

The ghost's memories had been purged: his name, his face in the mirror, childhood treasures, all of it gone. But those things were only facts. There was another knowledge, another history, another memory.

Processes could not be culled like facts. Start editing *those* and you might wake up to find out you couldn't read, or count, or breathe. Unconsciously, Hector was still the man he'd always been, which was why the watcher was trying to keep him talking. Banerjee wanted to observe his mannerisms and speech patterns.

"The cove's ecosystem required a small apex predator and the shark was as close as the paleobiologists could come." He looked into Banerjee's dark eyes. "Sometimes the past is impossible to recover."

Banerjee flashed his sharp white smile. "You really know your stuff."

"I've been doing this for over nine years," said Hector, certain the watcher knew this already.

Banerjee handed Hector a money card. "I guess I'll give the cove a try."

Hector debited a large sum and handed the card back. Banerjee would get a trace of his DNA, for all the good it would do him. Hector dipped his hands into the cool saltwater in the tank and came out with a set of feathery blue structures stacked on top of each other like pages in a book and bound by a slim metal strip forty centimeters long. He handed the gill to Banerjee and pulled out its mate.

"Hold the metal against your chest. The nanites will knit the gills into your system. It'll take about two hours for them to become viable. The gills don't replace your lungs, so don't try to breathe water through your nose or mouth. A tailored neurotransmitter will suppress your normal breathing reflex. Come see me when you want them off."

Banerjee nodded. "Thank you, Hector. I hope we'll get a chance to talk again."

Hector smiled. "Of course." His eyes followed the watcher down to the water's edge. Hector wondered if this was what terror had felt like to the dead man he'd been before.

A PAIR OF SMALL MOONS CAST CREAMY WHITE TRAILS ACROSS THE COVE'S BLACK surface. It could have been worse. Procyon's white dwarf companion was hidden below the horizon and dark clouds filled the western sky.

Hector crouched behind a palm tree, listening to the gentle wash of water against sand. The sharp tang of brine mingled with the musky odor of algae. The straps of the pack dug into shoulders and dry gills itched under his shirt.

Hector hadn't seen the watcher again. He'd slipped away before the end of his shift after persuading Nuahu to let him help set up the nightly beach party. The warm breeze carried the distant sound of music and laughter. The soft glow of the bonfire painted the clouds to the west a dull yellow. Banerjee and his control would be looking for him there.

He pulled on a pair of milgrade visgogs, selected the sensor pull-down menu, and blinked on IR. The beach glowed a soft green, the water was black. No one there.

He pulled out the dilapidated coracle hidden behind his stand. It wasn't even two meters long, and had seen better days. Black fungus rotted the wooden frame, and the hull's polymer skin was weathered and faded. Twice Nuahu had told him to get rid of it. Hector dropped his pack into the coracle and dragged it toward the water.

Rubberly kelp squished beneath his feet and sand fleas nipped at his ankles. A wave rolled in, drenching his legs with cold water.

He moved to the boat's stern, put his shoulder down, and shoved. The coracle slid into the water. Hector listened. Only the quiet rush of rolling water disturbed the silence. If he could make it to open ocean, he'd be safe.

Hector looked down at the black water. Never again would he drift above a garden of pale green anemones, fluorescent blue crinoids, and blood-red coral. More than anything, he'd miss hand-feeding the trilobites. They knew who he was, even if he did not. They'd swim to him, segmented thoraxes undulating, broad rounded heads rubbing against his skin, until he was lost in a cloud of small, trusting arthropods. Most of all he'd remember the gentle tickle of their mouthparts as they took the krill or bits of fish off his hand.

Except, of course, he wouldn't remember anything.

Something moved on the beach, jerking Hector's attention back to the present. His heart hammered in his chest. He blinked through sensor options: IR, enhanced visual, Doppler, UV, passive microwave, a dozen others. Still nothing. But it wouldn't take the watcher long to decide he wasn't at the party.

He glanced at the black ocean lurking beyond the safety of the reef. Suicide now or suicide later? Kill the body or kill the mind? Did it really matter?

Somewhere deep within the base of his skull, the reptile brain regis-

tered its vote: save the body. A survival instinct that had been ancient before the first mammals appeared overwhelmed the swirling doubts of his neocortex. He swung his body into the boat.

Hector started the boat's small motor with the touch of a button. He pointed the coracle's tiller toward the reef's low spot.

The boat drifted across the calm water, its motor humming softly. Hector glanced back. A sniper could cut him down easily enough. He clenched his jaw and turned his back to the beach.

He emptied the backpack's contents on the bottom of the boat. He set aside the blanket, the warmer, and the vial, and placed the bag of blood under his feet. He picked up a translucent golden capsule and popped it in his mouth. No turning back now.

Hector felt a jar and heard the whine of tortured plastic as the little propeller pushed the boat over the coral. Moisture licked at his feet. His transit had opened a pinhole in the boat's hull. The coracle began to roll in the ocean swells.

There were two possible destinations: Thebes and Memphis. Thebes lay eighty kilometers to the north, a sleepy little city of three hundred thousand with a small spaceport unable to accommodate starships.

Memphis, the system capital, sat on the headwaters of the Nile delta. With six million people, it was the largest city on the planet, home to the world's lone starport. And it lay only forty-three klicks to the west. At ten knots, he'd make it in just over two hours. He could lose himself in sprawling crowded Memphis and slip away to anywhere in the five systems. That's exactly what they'd expect him to do.

He turned the coracle west.

Hector unbuttoned his shirt and dipped his hand in the cold black sea. He splashed water over his gills, and the itching subsided. Hector wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and tasted salt.

He lay back and closed his eyes, feeling his body morph, and steeling himself for what came next. The physical ordeal would be grueling, but it was nothing next to the fear. After awhile he fell into a fitful sleep.

THE HARSH BUZZ OF THE COMPUTER'S ALARM JERKED HECTOR AWAKE. MEMPHIS glowed bright on the horizon.

He shivered. His mouth tasted foul, and his joints ached. He touched his forehead. He was burning up.

Hector switched on the warmer and placed the little cylinder under the blanket. If the cloud cover held, the orbital sats might interpret the warmer's heat signature as that of a human body.

He snapped the vial in half, and water thick with bioengineered bacte-

ria spilled onto the bag of blood. A crimson bead welled up on the bag's surface, collapsing into a tear that traced its way down the bag's side.

The visgogs went into the water with a soft plop. Hector took off his clothes and put them in the pack. He strapped it to his back. Thebes was a distant eddy in the gentle swirl of magnetic force.

Hector watched the boat's motor cut a frothy white wake in the black water. Waiting only made his task harder. Every second he delayed was a second he gave the watcher.

But to plunge into darkness...

A minute passed.

The hole in the coracle's bottom grew as the bacteria did their work. Water gurgled out of an opening the size of a quarter. The decision was already made; the boat would sink no matter what he did.

Still he waited.

Banerjee had identified him. Others had tried to escape their masters by mutilating their minds. No one could resist truth drugs, the reasoning went, but you couldn't be forced to testify against yourself if you didn't know who you were. But Hector's subconscious had given him away. They'll kill you, warned his neocortex.

Imagination conjured a phantom shape sliding through the black water. His reptile brain squealed in sub-literate terror.

Hector closed his eyes. Do it, he thought, before the balance of terror tips the other way.

He rolled into the water.

Darkness closed around him, swallowing him whole. He let himself fall straight down, just another random splash in the ocean. Move along monsters. Nothing to see here.

The water wasn't uncomfortable, though it had to be 15 or 20° C. He floated for a moment listening to the fading whine of the coracle's motor. Dark shadows flickered at the edge of his vision.

You have to do this, he thought. You've always had to do it, there was never any choice.

Hector kicked down, seeking the five-meter depth that would shield him from the orbital sats overhead.

He screwed his eyes shut, concentrating on the Thebian magnetic signature. He swam northeast, moving with smooth easy strokes, the nanites he'd ingested sculpting his body for the task.

Once, in the night, something brushed against him. Something smooth and cold-blooded and big. He panicked, thrashing against the thing as it tried to hold him down, and shot to the surface. He gulped air. Monsters roiled the ocean as far as the eye could see. It took a minute for

his adrenaline-soaked brain to identify what he was seeing.

Tuna.

He'd been spooked by a school of tuna. When the hammering in his chest subsided he ducked back underwater.

Swim. Mechanical. Unthinking. Just swim.

Dawn turned the black ocean blue, and somehow that was worse. No longer could he tell himself he swam in his own private bubble. He *saw* the endless expanse of water surrounding him, like a past full of unseen dangers hidden by a crippled memory.

He remembered the long session of forgetting, lying in a medtank while a disembodied expert system asked him about his family and his lovers and his home. Nanites smuggled past the blood-brain barrier recorded the flash of neurons as each deadly memory was evoked. He remembered the computer's deep voice, warm like the earth on a summer day, but of course he couldn't remember anything it said.

The computer showed him pictures of his past. Hector remembered this clearly, but if he tried to press past the memory, recall an actual *image*, all he saw was a flash of white light.

Then the nanites had been released to do their nasty little job. After the session, the computer gave him a chip with all the eraser's detailed research on the man Hector had been. He had picked up a pen laser and sprayed ruby light across the chip until nothing remained of his ghost but a little puddle of plastic and metal.

A large something glided through Hector's peripheral vision. He swallowed, and turned his head. The shark was a good twenty meters away, a featureless blue silhouette hovering at the edge of perception. Hector recognized the species only because of the beast's size. Ten meters wasn't big for a *megalodon*, but it was big enough.

The monster swam gracefully, moving in a course parallel to his, propelling itself with a casual flick of its great tail.

There was no reason the ocean had to have sharks, but they'd been introduced anyway. Some part of the hominid brain liked the idea that *out there* was wild, *out there* was something deadly.

Individual hominids had been known to regret this tendency when *out there* became *right here*.

Hector's heart pounded painfully in his chest. Dappled sunlight played across the shark's dusky gray back. Its belly was the same pale white that gave its modern cousin its name. He counted five gill slits, and Lord help him, he saw gleaming white triangles in those huge jaws. The shark was drawing closer.

It turned toward him. Hector faced the monster, unable to flee, unable

to think, unable even to resist the buffeting current raised by the beast's sudden movement. The shark angled away, its cold eye rolling toward him as it passed. With a powerful thrust of its tail, it faded into the ubiquitous blue.

Passed the test, Hector told himself. Sharks normally don't attack people. Certainly not without exhibiting their signature circling behavior.

Right.

Having no other option, Hector swam on.

PAIN CARESSSED MUSCLES TORTURED BY ALMOST TWO DAYS OF CONSTANT SWIMMING. Fatigue had scrubbed away Hector's fear. If the shark returned to end his life, it would at least be an *end*.

Hector felt the smooth convolution in the world's magnetic field that kept him on course. He lifted one arm over his head and pushed back, the other already coming up, his muscles crackling with pain. One more stroke, he told himself, over and over, until it was a litany of one, one, one, that fluctuated in rhythm to his silent agony.

He kept going. There'd be plenty of time to recover as he lay in a black market medtank, letting the nanites remake his body at the same time they killed his mind.

He didn't have to remember the terrifying swim. With a blink of his eye he could banish this memory with all the others that linked him to Hector Neumann, whose only crime was that he once had been another man whose name he couldn't remember.

The nanites would slice the ordeal out of his brain synapse by synapse, breaking the dendritic connections in which memory was stored. Just like that, the swim would be gone.

He'd take a sublight transport to a distant Dead Star System, sleeping in cryogenic suspension while his pursuers aged and died, escaping in time where before he'd failed to escape in space. So simple, except Hector, the man he was *now*, would have to die.

He saw a shadow in the water: the barnacle-encrusted pilings of the southside dock. He'd reached Thebes. He wrapped his body around a steel ladder. Hector wasn't sure how long he clung there: a second, a minute, an hour. The swim had robbed him of all sense of time. He reached up for the next rung.

He hauled himself up and his arm spasmed with pain. His legs trembled with the exertion, long-abused muscles threatening to give out. The straps of the backpack chafed his bare shoulders.

Somehow he reached for the next rung.

He pulled himself over the top of the dock and lay gasping for air, eyes

shut. The dying sun colored the inside of his eyelids red.

Something was wrong. He opened his eyes and looked up.

Dinesh Banerjee stood there, dressed in a pale green shirt and gray slacks, a dart gun dangling from his right hand.

Hector sucked in a startled breath, and stumbled to his feet. He was acutely aware of being naked.

"It's good to see you again, Walter." Banerjee smiled. "I was beginning to get worried."

Hector took a step backwards. A row of old dusty warehouses squatted beyond the docks. There wasn't another person in sight. Nowhere to run, no chance for help. He took another step backwards.

The watcher leveled the weapon at him. "*Stop.*"

Hector tripped and fell to the dock. His breath came in ragged gasps.

Banerjee waved his gun at the backpack. "In the water."

"But—"

"*Do it.*"

Hector shrugged out of the pack and pushed it over the dock's edge. It splashed. He buried his face in his hands.

"We never got to finish our talk," said Banerjee in the same cheerful voice one might use to offer a child ice cream.

Hector could barely lift his head. "How?"

"It wasn't hard. Your aversion to the ocean depths seemed genuine and fit with the generic psych profile. Traitors often develop a fear of open or exposed places."

Hector struggled to a sitting position. Streaks of crimson and translucent orange colored the horizon as Procyon slipped below the horizon. The sky above was deep lavender. Darkness was coming. "I'm not a traitor."

"So when a satellite picked up a small boat heading toward Memphis, all the pieces fit. Except you always were a clever man, Walter, quite capable of misdirection. And any man desperate enough to cull his memories, might also overcome his phobias. After that it was easy. We know where the Thebian erasers and bodymods are, so..." A flick of his hand encompassed the dock. He smiled his shark smile.

"I'm that predictable?"

Banerjee nodded. "Thank you for restoring my faith in humanity, Walter."

"Walter?"

"Ah." Banerjee raised his eyebrows. "Of course. How rude of me." He produced a small holodisk and touched a key. A life-size holo of a tall handsome man with dark-chocolate skin appeared. "Let me introduce you. Hector Neumann. this is Walter Redman, Former Pan-Chronos

Defense Minister and current traitor to the State. He and I have some unfinished business."

Walter? The name carried with it not even the faintest hint of familiarity. But why should it? The nanites had ruthlessly excised his previous identity. Hector had the sick feeling he'd finally come to the end of the game of "Guess what I was."

Hector shook his head. "I'm not Redman."

Banerjee sighed. "It's true I don't have a DNA match and of course truth drugs won't help." His lips twitched into a bitter smile. "But I spent every waking moment of eight long years studying your voice and habits." He leaned forward. "*I know*, Walter. You even believe it yourself. I can see it on your face."

"If you told me I was Santa Claus, I'd believe you."

"If you were Santa Claus you'd have a jolly laugh and a deep psychological need for giving," snapped Banerjee.

A form emerged from the shadows between the warehouses. The clack of shoes against concrete echoed in the semi-darkness. Banerjee's control. There was something familiar about the silhouette. Hector turned away. He was tired of these little games.

"What's the point?" he asked wearily. "Even assuming you haven't made some ghastly mistake—"

"There's no mistake," said Banerjee softly.

"I have no memories of this man's life. Walter Redman doesn't exist anymore."

Banerjee snorted. "I never had much patience for ontological riddles."

"Me neither," said a soft alto voice. The control. Her slim body was wrapped in a white cotton suit and she wore a matching wide-brimmed hat. Her face glowed with a healthy tan and tawny hair fell to her shoulders. Hector blinked. She was the sunbather from Trilobite Cove. "Is he Redman, or not?"

Banerjee's lips curled. "Where have you been?"

"Accepting a priority transmission from *my* control," she snapped. "Now answer my question."

Doubt flickered across Banerjee's face. Hector realized even if the watcher had made a mistake, it was too late for him to admit it. Unfortunately, Banerjee's back was to the woman, so she hadn't seen his uncertainty.

"It's him," he growled.

"Even if I were Redman, why punish me? What could you do to me that would be worse than purging everything I've ever loved?"

"We'll think of something," said Banerjee mildly.

"You're not serving justice."

"Screw justice," snarled Banerjee. "When you disappeared, there were a lot of hard questions about why I hadn't seen it coming."

"There still are, Dinesh," said the woman sweetly. "But the State must have its object lesson." Banerjee glanced at her as she leveled a dart gun at Hector. He turned back, his own gun falling to his side. A coldness settled in Hector's stomach.

She jerked the weapon to the right and her finger tightened on the trigger. The dart gun coughed twice and Banerjee's body jerked.

Hector jumped.

Banerjee fell and his gun clattered across the dock. He balled his hands into fists, his body shaking with tension. "Why?" he croaked.

"I just received new orders." She crouched down next to him. "One of our operatives inside the Tellus government confirmed Redman defected there nine years ago."

"No," Banerjee whispered.

"Oh, yes. Not only did you miss Redman's disloyalty, but you convinced us to waste a decade tracking down the wrong man."

Banerjee coughed. "What...?" His voice trailed off into a quiet gasp.

"What are we going to do with you?" The woman's lips twisted cruelly. "We'll give you the same basic set-up as Neumann. Mutilated memory, menial job. Except *you* will be on display."

Banerjee groaned, his mouth a rictus.

Hector suppressed a shudder. Undoubtedly, molecular machines were working feverishly within Banerjee's muscles to paralyze him. Artificial rigor mortis stiffened the watcher's body.

The control ran a finger down his cheek. "We wanted an example of what happens to traitors, but we'll settle for an example of what happens to failures."

Banerjee stared up at her, face frozen in horror.

"What about me?" asked Hector.

The woman stood. "You were on your way to an eraser to get your memory scrubbed. I'll make sure you get there."

"I'm not the man you wanted. Let me go."

She shook her head. "You know too much."

"Look what I've given up to stay hidden. Telling what happened here would only draw unwanted attention."

"That's probably true. But unlike some," she waved her gun at Banerjee, "I won't gamble on 'probably.'"

Hector shook his head.

The woman shrugged. "As you like." She brandished her gun. "I can shoot you and roll your body into the bay. No one's going to come look-

ing for you, not when your blood-soaked boat is found."

Hector bit his lower lip. Kill the body or kill the mind? His brain gave the only answer two million years of hominid evolution would allow. "All right." He held up his hands, his voice quickened by fear. "All right. But if I'm going to be erased anyway..."

"What?"

"Tell me who I was."

The beautiful woman tilted her head back and laughed. "How the hell should I know?" •

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Good or bad, right or wrong were last century's torture rack. More and better was the new program. Existence, season two, retooled based on audience feedback....

Tomorrow Station

Daniel Ksenych

I DREAMED BEFORE THE CONVERGENCE AND I DREAMED THE new dreams that came after the Convergence.

The old guard, now forgotten or mythologized: imagine them as professorial preachers sweating in desperation as they deliver their protests, teeth clenched, as if devotion could sustain the crumbling architecture of last century's ideologies. They claimed, insistently, that our culture was devolving into illusion. That our internet, our TV, our videogames, that this thing we had wrought, this media, was an inverse Gnostic prison severing us from apprehension of the real. Popular opinion has cast them now as the usurped tyrant-kings, when it considers them at all. Their ghosts channeled only occasionally as residual doubts that the Convergence, its wonder, could be something we actually achieved.

It was our media that did it, so the common theory runs. That dissolved our rigid categories and hierarchical criteria to the point when we were open enough to make contact. A mutation, adapting us for post-Convergence life, where reality is a TV show, a videogame. Where there is no longer one reality, but three.

Last night I dreamed of a fourth.

MY FOURTEENTH-FLOOR APARTMENT, SECOND HAND FURNITURE, COMIC BOOK and movie posters now statussed as parareligious iconography. Basic homeworld tech, laptop and TV and stereo, patched to Alt-D boost modules. The view from the window a hermetic reflection of my upgraded computer and entertainment system; pre-Convergence skyline of office buildings, city blocks veined with sidewalks and automobile flow, now implanted and prostheticked with newworld housing-hives, sensor towers, condition generators. The surgery still fresh enough to catch the eye, to make you feel great about the new day.

Sipping morning coffee, already dressed for visitors—baggy black pants and fitted black shirt, smartwear lined with two-way pheremonal interface fibers from Alt-D:O, standard issue for Freelancers. I gesture and the laptop activates, transmitting my preferred newsfeed.

"...most impressive performance to date. Meanwhile, three rogue Modifyre Specialists from Alt-D:X were brought in by a Capture Team last night. Their conversion back to Agenda was smooth and mutually beneficial. The Specialists are believed to have been in league with homeworld anti-caste separatists. Here's Dr. Ewell to comment on the persistent insecurity complexes that plague members of such..."

That would have been Mortimer's team, the capture he invited me on. I declined with no conscious reason, perhaps the foreshadowing of last night's revelation.

I feel things begin to go cinematic, let my perception slide into shape, the skill the Root-caste lacks. The lines of the walls and posters crisp, the air phosphors. I cut to subjective camera, a vision of a circuit-laced cube, lights winking out, beginning to separate along jigsaw seams. Deactivating the apartment security grid.

And the Response Team materializes in the apartment, snapping into view like a modemed image. Not a clean entrance; the windowpane cracks and the coffee vaporizes. Three of them, two hybrids and one full O-born. We share flashes of monitor screens, full body shots of each of us, glowing text detailing names and stats.

(I'm) Bryce Otaku: Freelance-caste Adept. Supernormal ratings in Mana, Tao and Morph. Holds current high score in the Liminal Angel scenario.

Macy Torrentula: D:N/X hybrid, Agenda Stalker. Supernormal rating in Body-Hacking. The two burning cartoon eyes floating to either side of her elegant, brown skinned face are labeled as "mobile We.C.U.s."

Fortune Octondicular: D:N/O hybrid. Agenda Battery. Cartilage micro-craters open from her shoulders, forearms and thighs, venting wisps of energy like radioactive cigarette smoke, visible through patches

cut from her sleek green action-suit.

Kata: D:O dominant species. "His" D:N viro-armor looks like a dense net of optical fibers woven into a humanoid shape, flickering rainbow-hued from "his" internal physiology. Supernormal rating in Head-Hacking. Recurring role in three of the top-rated series.

Luckily I read a lot of comic books.

"You called?" Kata asks, voice mercurial. We share a flashback scene from the end of my dream sequence. Surfacing through the million-membraned borderland between sleep and wake, triggering the teleteric filaments installed by Alt-D:X engineers in a near lucid layer. Sending out a message.

I nod in such a way that cues their internal soundtracks for a serious, slightly menacing underscore. They exchange looks, and with lots of drama, decide to shift the scene to their local headquarters.

THE CONVERGENCE WASN'T EASY. AS MEDIATED AS OUR WORLD HAD BECOME, AS fluid and imaginative as we had become, the simultaneous fusion with two distinct, diverse and complex realities was intense. Too much so for a lot of people: neophobes planetwide died in droves as their psyches initiated heart-attacks, strokes, seizures, hemorrhages and more typical forms of suicide as defense measures. Even for the neophiles, the net-junkies, the movie-addicts, the artists, things were confusing for a long time. The Convergence-shock was egalitarian across all of the realities; no one except the most radical in each world expected it. It was the result of no conscious agenda.

After the initial culling of the dinosaur-brained from the alien-brained there still remained the divide of those who wanted it and those who didn't. A new wave of Puritanism and separatism. And the divide between those who could and those who couldn't. The new caste. Then the trials and struggles and conflicts of a world factored by three.

Yet our dreams had come true. Good or bad, right or wrong were last century's torture rack. More and better was the new program. Existence, season two, retooled based on audience feedback.

BRIEFING ROOM, HOLD 13, LOCAL NODE OF THE AGENDA'S TRANSDIMENSIONAL mission to police and enhance post-Convergence life. High ceiling, dimly lit, circular conference table. Walls covered in a mosaic of homeworld screens, 12,000 channels, no immediate difference between news, dramas, reality shows and cartoons. I lean forward, elbows on the table, everyone shifting likewise—Kata, Macy, Fortune and Charlie, a slight, earnest ops producer—as Mr. Gregory enters the room. Rumpled,

lo-fi suit, thick features. He begins speaking just as the wood paneled door clicks shut behind him.

"It's confirmed. Holds 3, 7, 31 and 40 have received similar accounts as Mr. Otaku's from Agenda sensitives. Freelance agents and even some Root-caste citizens. Broad demographics. Seventy-four prophecy-class dreams in total. Alt-D:O and Alt-D:X report an additional 264 oneiric events."

Fortune murmurs, "I wonder if the numerology is a factor..."

"We have also registered," Gregory continues, "two hard drives worth of NewFO sightings, Tres Fort-ean phenomena and..."

"What?" Macy asks.

"And three micro-plague level outbreaks of unexplained deaths."

"So we're looking at..." Charlie says hesitantly, "another Convergence."

Monitors flicker with global coverage.

"Of a sort," Gregory responds as he takes a seat. "Evidence suggests only one new reality. So far. Theory has already gone to work. They're talking elemental geometry, possible invasion, that our synthesis has in turn bred an entirely new reality—"

"Theory sucks," Macy says, getting a smile from Fortune and an orange flicker from Kata.

Gregory half-smirks. "It's that too-cool-for-school attitude we like in our main characters. Which is why you've been selected as the investigating team here in D:N. We're asking Otaku to sign on as well."

I nod, secreting agree-pheromones into my clothes, which begin communicating with the Hold's ubiquitous network, signing the contract, requesting equipment, quibbling over the details of compensation.

Gregory stands again, classic blocking. "Everyone run their 'shipping-out-tomorrow' scripts this evening. At dawn we'll have a start point and you can hit the field."

Charlie cuts in before the scene wraps. "What's the over-arching theme here?"

Gregory surveys the team, leaving it open for them.

"Is this the best thing that could happen?" says Fortune.

"Or the worst," Kata says.

"Or both," I add, to everyone's pleasure.

TANGLED IN BEDSHEETS, SWEAT COOLING IN THE NIGHT AIR. BEING NAKED IS SO much better now than before. Initially, right after the synthesis, it felt like a thousand eyes were watching you all the time; getting naked, going to the bathroom, squeezing a pimple, it was all very uncomfortable. For me

anyway. The imagination that bred me for Freelance status was always a very private thing in the old world. The last century's embarrassment of desire. It changed though, I changed it or was changed by it, transcending the paranoia of absolute surveillance and coming on-line, reborn, as something liberated. An evolution as puzzling and inspiring as the wing or the eye.

Miranda runs her fingertips absently over her stomach, tracing a spiral around her navel, staring at the ceiling.

"It's different this time," she says. "Isn't it? This time we know what's happening. We can choose it or not."

I'm trying to remember the details of last night's dream, but they've already faded.

"Is it?" I ask from her shoulder. "Maybe we chose it last time. Maybe we did know what we were doing. I remember reading a sci-fi story on the internet before it happened. It described things not unlike what eventually took place. I dunno. Can we choose how things change? If they change?"

Miranda rolls from under me, my head sliding onto the pillow.

"You're getting philosophical again. I know, you'll tell me it's what got you this far." She smiles. "Smug bastard. The Convergence proved everything you thought right. I wonder if that writer's as pleased with himself as you are.

"At least you waited until after the sex before getting intellectual. That's different."

"A guy can change, can't he?" I smile. She thwacks me with another pillow.

Then she kisses me.

"Good luck tomorrow."

And she dresses and leaves, gesturing at the stereo on her way out to call up my favorite gearing-up-for-the-mission song.

A DESERT, DUNES, HOT SUN, SHELVES OF PALE STONE SURFACING LIKE ZOMBIE ROCK. My clothes cooperate with Macy's extended Kirlian field to keep me cool. Fortune's kneeling, sifting through the sand, analyzing its makeup for potential conversion.

"This," I ask rhetorically, "is where Agenda triangulated the most likely point of penetration?"

One of Macy's hovering eyes looks at me and winks. It's tagging my word-choice, seeing clearly the lingering traces of kundalini from last night's meeting with Miranda. I grin back at it.

Kata says in "his" slippery voice, "It would suggest something covert. If

the reality is to breach here, with no witnesses.”

Fortune straightens. “You’re implying intention to the event.”

“Wasn’t that Theory’s latest?” I ask. “Our Convergence acting as a summoning beacon to other higher-order realities?”

Macy sneers. “And what? Now, having reached the necessary degree of cosmic consciousness, we’re gonna be invited to join the Galactic Federation? Please, New Age is so old school.”

Fortune asks, “What about O and X? Have they targeted entry points?”

“Jesus,” I say. “Did none of you listen to Gregory’s briefing?”

Kata shimmers. “We’re Agents. Otaku. Actors, not writers. That’s why you’re here.”

“All right then. I’ve got an idea.”

They gather round as the view pulls back, our forms small and sharp in the wash of tan and light, as the music rises to drown out my voice. Then back in close on Macy.

“Sure. Why not?”

“It has... ramifications,” Kata says. “We’d be escalating the game. Making a decision that could effect everyone.”

“At least contact would be on our terms and not theirs.” Fortune says. “Or its. Whatever. I’m not even sure we could do it, though.”

A hot wind kicks up a curtain of dust that swirls and parts around Macy’s field. We all recognize it as feedback from reality, a cue, an omen. Confirming that we’re on a track with my proposal, but would the episode end up as a tragedy or an ovation-grabbing triumph?

“I did the math, Fortune,” I say. “The numerology worked out to four. And there’s four of us. Four realities.” Now speaking to everyone. “Macy’s earth. Fortune’s fire. Kata’s air and I’m water. Macy’s body. Kata’s mind. Fortune’s energy. I’m spirit. I can go on.”

Macy furrows her brow. “Shouldn’t we have a full X-born here then? One of each plus a hybrid?”

Kata says, “There’s no three-way hybrids...”

I shrug. “I dunno. I’m making this up. C’mon, sex first, philosophy second.”

“Yeah,” Macy nods. “I’m horny. Let’s do it.”

Pause. The decision gets made. Resume.

“Do we clear it with Agenda?” Fortune asks.

“Baby, we are Agenda,” Macy answers.

We assume go-poses. Fortune starts to charge up, speed-scanning the seven energy spectrums for a thread to tease. Macy begins boosting our materiality to withstand transfer-stress. Kata clicks on conference-consciousness, linking our thoughts. I tap my Mana, Tao and Morph Skills to

direct our perceptual movement, conjuring images of keys, of one key, hungry to complete its karma and unlock.

Then everything goes wrong.

SOME OF THE SEPARATISTS INSIST WE LOST SOMETHING WHEN CONVERGENCE happened. They invoke a colonized-culture model. The body count is the most obvious proof. Identity, self-determination, history each get their eulogies as well, laments offered as necromancy, chants to raise these ideas from the dead.

You'd think most separatists would come from the realities' Root-classes, re-cast after the Convergence in the same boring roles they had before. Maintenance, extras, crew, foundation. Those with Freelance or Agent capabilities get all the best parts.

But you'd be wrong. The Roots' transition was the least turbulent; more of the same to do, only with better things to watch on TV or out the window. Not everyone thinks being an audience is a value judgment.

Most of the resistance comes from upper-caste. I dunno. I'm happy.

I listen to them. Their critiques and attacks and challenges. They're a part of all this too. My empathy has limits, though. I lost nothing in the Convergence and gained everything. Sometimes I wonder if it's because I had nothing to begin with. No purpose or satisfaction beyond my escapist fantasies and self-indulgent theories.

When I imagine a world without Convergence I feel afraid.

"IT'S GONE. IT'S ALL GONE." I'M CURLED UP ON MY COUCH, EYES MOIST AND SQUEEZED SHUT.

"Listen." Miranda is stroking my hair, but her voice has a tremble. "If the character in the movies wakes up to learn everything's been a hallucination it's still all part of the movie. Right?"

I can only shudder. She goes on.

"And it's not all gone."

My tech upgrades are still active. My clothes are still smarter than me. The Agenda still evaced me to the Hold, still used some, only some, Alt-D medicine to stabilize me. I can still feel my Skills. I can remember it all.

Macy and Fortune were rescued too, but they had changed. They were badly hurt. Kata was gone.

"I think..." Miranda is saying. "I think it only severed high-concentrations of synthesis. Like excising the tumor but leaving infected cells."

I manage to sit up. I managed to keep my cool during the evac—no teleport, they had to send in copters. And during the debrief. I can't really remember it all. Shock. They got me back to the apartment, Haven

Protocols, and called Miranda in for support. Both hers and mine, except I broke down first.

"Hell, girl. That's quite a metaphor."

She smiles at me, strong but wounded, and I wrap an arm around her shoulders.

"We're still superheroes, right?" she asks, leaning her head to my chest. Feels my head nodding. "So screw waiting for Agenda. Let's solve this ourselves."

"Yeah." I squeeze her close, then we begin to move. "Call Mortimer and Stacy. Agenda's probably paralyzed, cut into three and all. Maybe this is why Convergence created Freelancers."

The city streets are quiet, nighttime calm, stilled with fear. Everyone at home watching the feeds, waiting for explanation. The stores are still open though, the restaurants, Root-class doing what they do. Uptown, three anti-caste groups are having a riot-parade, the homeworld cops giving them their celebration but ready to take containment action if necessary. The Agenda is silent.

We meet at Conductor, hip cafe, one waiter and one alcoholic at the bar. I'm walking the new team through the events, we're building a narrative. Doing what we do.

The heralding of the fourth world, which they all know about. The genesis of the mission, already gossip in our circles. My plan in the desert to ambush the new reality, to go there before it came here, for reconnaissance. And then the explosion. The blackout, the tearing. Whatever it was that happened, planetwide and violent, to cut us off from the other realities.

"A pre-emptive strike?" Stacy asks. She's giving out no judgment but that would make my idea the cause.

"Maybe..." Mortimer sips his latte. "Maybe it's just what the fourth reality does. Or did."

Miranda ashes her cigarette, X-harvested herbs giving off their strange aroma. "I was thinking a major assault by a transdimensional coalition of separatists?"

Mortimer answers. "I'd hope something of that scale would've attracted Agenda's attention."

"Is it too conspiracy-theory to suspect the Agenda?" Stacy asks. Miranda shrugs and adds:

"I was also thinking some metaphysical deal where we were shown Convergence, given it, and now we have to consciously re-attain it. To choose it."

"Or d) all of the above," Mortimer says.

I drink my coffee. "Okay. Videogame template, RPG modality. The characters have to complete the level's task before the if/then codes open the plot-sequence for the next one."

The door to the cafe opens. Our internal soundtracks kick in, low pulsing starting to rise, intensify. It's action-scene music.

Stacy lowers her pint glass to the table in slow motion.

"Maybe we just did."

THEORY'S CURRENT POSITION ON VIOLENCE: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF CHANGE. Violence is popular because it has consequences, it has irreversibility. Which generates meaning, a measure of what is against what is not. It creates absence, which allows for perceptual orientation in time.

Agenda has at least three top-echelon projects working on "saves," "recording" and "replays," so we can have the excitement of violence without its permanence.

Theory says it can't work. It hasn't yet.

IT'S A TWELVE MEMBER HIT SQUAD FROM ALT-D: AND WE'RE THE TARGETS. PURE white featureless viro-armor, they're like three dimensional silhouettes. Spreading through the cafe with accelerated acrobatic motion, synchronized, probably hive-minded.

I'm translating; this is how we're interpreting things.

Their voices are non-local, disembodied, but distinguishable in tone. They're only saying one thing though, as their arms raise and bolts of white light discharge from their fists. As our tables and glasses, as the chairs we've leapt away from, explode.

"We love you."

"We love you."

"We love you."

Mortimer's twin-barrel hand cannon launches two shells, a homeworld frag-grenade and an X-designed cortex-rot implosive. The accompanying sound effects crash into the audio track. Two of the blank assassins go black and shatter. Two more caught in the blast break out in inky blotches, asymmetrical Rorschachs.

"Nice visuals," Miranda says as she goes into a forward roll, coming up in front of three attackers. She runs a combo of N and D martial arts, spinning, kicking and ducking a light-bolt, striking closed fist and open palmed. Splotching the bad guys like paint splattering canvas until the white is black and they burst apart.

"Thunder Channel Attack!" Miranda shouts, posing at the end of her forms.

I Morph into stealth mode, walking calmly, breath even, into a cluster of enemies. They can't see me, they're firing at Stacy as she cartwheels through a swarm of bolts, but I can still hear them.

"We love you."

"We love you."

"Shut up!" Mortimer yells, training his gun on the two wounded figures. Then he's tagged by a shot from another. Only a shoulder hit but he disappears in a blaze of crackling snow.

My anger kicks me out of the delicacy of the cloak, the white shadows registering me, but I'm right beside them, tapping my Mana Skill and rerouting my anger into a shockwave. It's a full manga-style discharge, the background blurring into a wash of streaking colors. I growl as three more hitmen detonate.

"Clear!" Stacy orders, Miranda and I backflipping to the edges of the cafe. Stacy is a high-scoring Matter-Hacker: as she clenches her hand into a fist all of the chairs, tables, paintings, lamps, barstools and debris are sucked in, highspeed, towards the centerpoint of the remaining attackers. A collision like a hammer from all directions at once, and the rest of the bad guys are ashed.

It's quiet now. The alcoholic was vaporized by a stray bolt. Miranda is giving first-aid to the waiter, his side punctured by shrapnel.

I'm holstering Mortimer's gun, staring at the space where he had been. Going through a montage of my memories. Mortimer pulling me out of the way of the malfunctioning Tunnlernaught we had been hired to destroy. Mortimer writing a letter to his daughter as we hid in the shelter during the first major N/X skirmishes. Handing Mortimer the copy of *Strange Addictions* he's always wanted but could never find.

Stacy, standing beside me, crying softly, says, "What's going on?"

TWO DAYS LATER. AN ALLEYWAY OFF QUIET DOWNTOWN STREETS. GRAY DAWNLIGHT leaking in around the edges of the high buildings. Trash and stains. Charlie stamping out his cigarette stub.

He says, "All the major Freelancers got hit, but you know that already."

It's a scene from a war movie, planet under siege, the resistance meeting secretly in the occupied city. I nod. The mood is utterly grim.

"Most of the remaining architectural and communications upgrades," Charlie continues, "have also been targeted. It's only been more white-suit squads, not hard to kill, but they're straightforward and persistent. Even the separatists have shut up, a 'be-careful-what-you-wish-for' script I guess."

I sigh. It's been a terrible two days. Running and hiding. Dodging.

We're all low on ammo and gear, lots of us have been killed. And killing the hitsquads is too cold, too clean to be vengeful or satisfying. Their three-word audio loop, the only communication from them we can recognize, besides their violence, is wearing at the deepest levels of our education, conditioning and ideas about how things work.

"Miranda said something..." I say, glancing at the graffitied walls.
"About a disease, about it being cleansed."

Charlie's eyebrows quirk. "What are you getting at?"

"No one ever thinks about the cancer's point of view."

"Bryce..."

"Think about it... Body gets sick, the cancer spreads, fusing distinct organs into a uniform tumorous mass."

"Aw, jeez..." Charlie winces.

"The mind decays. Fever dreams. Hallucinations and delusions."

"You mean the media? That's old guard talk, Bryce."

"Until the body gets help. Calls the doctor." I look at Charlie. "Model this whole thing as surgery and tell me it doesn't scan."

Charlie shifts uncomfortably, stuffs his hands in his pockets. "No. It's to mind vs. body for me. I don't buy it."

"No, me neither. So what then?"

"I've got an idea." I angle my shoulders towards him, give him center stage. "Most movies end once the struggle gets worked out, right? The couple finally gets together, the world is saved. I think we, everyone, has been looking at Convergence as the end of the movie. We made it, hurray, roll credits. And we've been trying to work out what to do next."

"Lots of action still. Rogue agents, dissidents, multidimensional criminals. And lots of play; new toys, new games, new ideas. Exploration and such. Maybe it's more like a comic book or TV series. Maybe the series has run its course. So what do you do?"

"Introduce a new threat. Or back to the movie version for a second; maybe Convergence wasn't the end of the story but the beginning. Maybe the real plot is what's happening now."

I give it a pause. "I like it. It's exciting."

"Right." Charlie grins. "You shouldn't—we shouldn't—have a bloody clue what's happening or what to do about it because we've just found this channel. Exciting, like things should be."

I smile back at him. "It's kinda like *Star Wars*."

Charlie's grin widens.

BEFORE THE CONVERGENCE, WE WOULD WATCH TV AND CRITIQUE THE SHOWS. What they did right, what they did wrong. There were some shows I

couldn't critique, though. Shows I was really into. I didn't just watch them, I experienced them. They were something that happened. I went where they took me.

Sure, when a new character was introduced, you knew it was a technical decision. A ratings grab, maybe an actors dispute. Change was artifice. That's what you knew, but what I felt was things unfolding, different things happening. New directions, new possibilities. More, better.

After the incident in the desert, I was trying to work out what went wrong, and how to make it right. The old rack.

During the Convergence, most of those TV critic-types didn't make it. I became a Freelance-caste superhero.

Before we parted ways in the alley, I asked Charlie about Agenda. He said, "The Agenda's in ruins." And I flashbacked to Macy in the desert, right before the opening scene of the movie.

FADE IN.

An aerial shot swooping over a vast desert. A structure comes into view from the top of the shot. Massive, lattice-worked, metallic, crystalline. Towers studded with humming, insect-eye pods. Dagger-like gun turrets. A hazy cloud of nano-gas gauzing the curves and angles of the complex like an atmosphere.

The beachhead for Alternate Dimension:?'s invasion of Earth.

Cut to the crest of a nearby dune. Five black-suited figures crouching, one of them studying the base with modified binoculars, its sensors broadcasting the visual pickup with graphic commentary into the imaginations of the others.

They look like soldiers, like survivors. Outfitted like expensive action figures. Highlight and select individual members of the team.

Miranda Stockholm: Valkyrie-class ninja.

Stacy Slowburn: tactical Matter-Hacker.

Nebraska Miller: Vat-grown Crisis Girl.

Sergi Cut: Borderwalk guru.

Bryce Otaku: Media-star.

Sergi lowers the binoculars and the team exchanges nods. Stacy powers up her tactile-enhancement gauntlets and Miranda begins whispering mantras. Nebraska bangs a battery-clip into the steel skeleton of her Apocalazer rifle. Sergi adjusts the straps on his jetpak.

Mana. I draw Mortimer's gun. Tao. I point at our target. Morph. We all smile.

Press Start. •

*Even though these were just sims,
Garrett knew one day it'd be for real,
and a virtsim could never be as
ass-puckering as reality...*

No Life Like It

Steven Mills

GARRETT BANGED HIS BUG-FACE WITH THE HEEL OF HIS gloved hand. "It's too goddamn hot," he said and slapped the side of his helmet again.

"Shut up, Doc, they're coming," CandyAss said over the company channel.

Through the snarl of vines, Garrett could see CandyAss's long body about two and a half yards ahead, working point. Fatigues blurring into the jungle floorcover. Dull black virtual combat helmet turning slowly as he scanned the target zone. CandyAss crouched, picked up a smooth stone, dropped it into a pocket, then eased ahead two more yards.

Garrett snorted. CandyAss liked to collect stuff. He had an odd assortment from the Middle East—stones, shell casings, coins, a piece of an Israeli helmet. And even though everything he took in a sim disappeared on the ride home in the hellevator, he still liked to do it.

"Damn heat regulator is screwing up again," Garrett said, explaining.

"You heard him, Private." Captain Braddock jerked a gloved hand across his throat. "Cut it!"

CandyAss dropped out of sight among the ferns. "Everybody down!"

Gunfire exploded out of the jungle.

Garrett tongued the sound clit, dampening the crack-crack of automatic

weapons' fire. He crouched low, waiting for instructions from Braddock. Sweat ran into his eyes as he scanned the bio-screens on the inside of his visor. Heart rhythms, brain waves, vital signs all combat-normal. Even for Michaels, the new guy. Raid, they called him. Kills bugs dead.

Garrett huddled in the trail mud as rockets burst the tree beside him. Leaves and shredded bark ticker-taped onto his back and legs. He looked up, wiped the mud from his visor, and belly-crawled. More rocket fire.

"Second Wave, cover pattern Delta. CandyAss, you're still point. You call it."

"Hold position," CandyAss said.

Bio-screen skipped off scan. *WILSON, WILLIAM A. PTE.*, in miniature glowing letters.

Garrett pinpointed him on the grid-tracking window in the upper right of his visor, then crawled fast through the underbrush, armored elbows and knees digging into the soft ground. He pushed his way through dark ferns, rolled over a log, dropping onto thorns and heavy leaves.

Bullets cracked overhead. Garrett ducked. Wilson's bio-screen showed a bullet wound, left anterior thigh, a large exit wound posterior; the femur was shattered. Pulse and resps high. The virtcom suit had dosed him with 5 cc morphine already.

More rocket fire.

"Second Wave," CandyAss said, "let's be nimble, let's be quick." He rabbed through the brush, firing into the trees.

Garrett crawled up beside Wilson, who had pulled himself under thick jade-green leaves. "Bill, can you hear me?" Garrett said, jamming the bush out of the way. "Don't move, okay?"

"Jesus, Doc. I didn't get down fast enough. They're gonna fry my ass for taking a hit this early in the sim. Jesus, this hurts."

"First hit, right?"

"Yeah. I been clean through twenty-eight drops."

Henderson and Michaels scrambled past Garrett.

"Make it quick, Doc," Henderson said, "or you're gonna get left behind."

"Keep your shirt on, Henderson." Garrett pulled a probe from his bag. "This is going to hurt a bit, Bill." Garrett nestled the probe into the wound. "But it'll feel better in a second." He released the lidocaine, quickly filled the entrance and exit wounds with sealant, then glued suit patches over the wound sites.

"It's a little hard to breathe in here," Wilson said.

"Here," Garrett said, increasing Wilson's oxygen flow. "Remember the first sim, when Henderson took a chest hit and couldn't breathe, and I

pulled her helmet off?"

Wilson took a deep breath, laughed through the pain. "Yeah, they canned the sim right then and there, and you were in shit head-first, man."

"Got a good look at this oversized warehouse they use for these sims."

"And you just about got your ass kicked back to Syria!"

"That morphine helping?"

Wilson nodded.

Rosalynn Esperanza stopped, crouched beside Wilson. Slapped his shoulder. "Jeez, Bill. Some guys'll do anything to get outta the grunt work."

"Shut up, Ros," Wilson said.

Garrett tongued over to Base channel. "Foxtrot Company, Second Wave, Medic Garrett."

"Foxtrot Medic, go ahead."

"Foxtrot: one hit. Wilson, William A.. Private. Sending bio-read and location, now." Garrett dumped the hot-link to the MASH. "Evac to this position. I'm moving on. Garrett, clear."

"Foxtrot Medic. Data received. Evac team en route."

Garrett rapped Wilson's visor. "See you in briefing, man."

Wilson grunted.

THE BRIEFING ROOM FILLED WITH CHEERS AS WILSON SAUNTERED IN.

Garrett crossed his arms, and leaned back.

Sheila Henderson passed her bug-face around. "Pay up, assholes," she said.

"You picked *me*?" Wilson stared. "I been clean—"

"—through twenty-eight drops. Yeah, yeah, we know," she said. "It's statistics, Wilson. Don't take it personally. Besides, the money's going to a good cause."

"Yeah, right. Up your nose."

"Fuck you."

Captain Braddock climbed up onto the platform and the room scraped into silence. Garrett propped his boots up on the back of Ros' chair.

"Just some housekeeping before we begin the debriefing. Next scheduled sim will be 0600 Saturday and it'll be urban. And maybe an alien scenario, too, but that's just a rumor. The Nerds seem to have something up their collective sleeve. As soon as I know anything, I'll pass it on. And don't forget: at 2100 tonight, there's a little get-together at the club to celebrate Garrett's birthday. And, of course, Mr. First-Hit Wilson is buying."

Cheers and whistles erupted.

Ros turned. "Happy birthday, old fart," she said to Garrett, then grinned.

ELECTRIC GUITAR CRANKED THROUGH ANOTHER RIFF. A ROAR ERUPTED AT THE crashball table. Garrett peered through the cigarillo smoke. Ros danced her victory dance and collected her winnings.

She clomped across the club floor dragging Wilson with her and flopped onto her chair. "C'mon, Bill, just quit while you're ahead." She pushed him into the chair beside her. "Oh, right," she said and winked at Garrett before leaning toward Wilson. "you're not ahead. *You're the one who lost!*" She threw her head back and howled. Wilson scowled at her.

Garrett laughed. He'd expected to be miserable tonight. In fact, he'd planned on it. But Ros wouldn't let him out of the bar. She leaned on the table, breathing beer and garlic into Garrett's face. "Whipped his ass again, Doc: 21-10." She flopped back in her chair. "Your heart's just not in it tonight, is it, Bill?"

More shouting at the crashball table as Henderson and Michaels gloved up.

"Want another beer, Doc?" Wilson said. He lurched to his feet and headed to the bar without waiting for Garrett's reply.

"You're looking pretty goddamn morose, for being the birthday boy," Ros hollered above the music and the chanting of the c-ball crowd.

Garrett snorted, and laughed again. "I told you. I like to have my space on my birthday."

"What's the matter? Ain't Army life all it's cracked up to be?" Ros said. "Or is this something bigger, something you wanna blame your mama for?"

Wilson banged the pitcher of beer on the table. "Nah, he just doesn't like the fact that he ain't gonna get laid this year 'cause we're stuck here at fucking 'virtual bootcamp.'"

Garrett grinned up at him. "Your mother know you talk like that?"

"Like what?" Wilson said, then turned to Ros. "Henderson's killing Raid. You shoulda seen that last point. She's been practicing."

"You gonna take her on, Bill?" Ros said.

"No way, Ros. It's not my night. Besides" —he threw a grin at Garrett then turned back to Ros— "she's ten times better than you."

"Bullshit!"

Wilson rolled his eyes.

Garrett laughed, and refilled his mug. "Twenty credits says you can't take her," he said.

"Get outta my way." Ros rocked to her feet, shoved Wilson aside, and headed back to the crowd. Wilson followed.

Garrett sipped his beer. Nah, the Army's okay, he thought. He'd been scared shitless when the second-round draft started after things in the

Middle East theater blew apart two years before. But his life in the EMS in Seattle on the Life-Flight team had mired itself to a standstill. There was a freeze on training, a freeze on funding, and a freeze on wages. The only option available had been management.

Fuck that, he'd said to Carla, his partner on car. She'd just laughed, and told him what they both already knew, that Ira Garrett was too much of a 911-junkie to spend the next decade of his life behind a computer monitor.

The Army had been interested in his EMS experience from the start. In March of '24, after initial training, they sent him to Damascus for a year, riding ambulance on the south side, then later triaging for a MASH unit further north in Syria when the shit really hit the fan.

Six months ago the Army pulled him from his unit and dropped him into a specialized virtual reality combat training company. A new program, they said, to be used to combat-harden troops before they had to actually experience real combat.

Garrett refilled his beer mug from the pitcher Wilson bought. Across the room, Ros slammed another point home. Henderson's face flushed, she downed two more shots of tequila, and served, the crashball a streak of blue light. Michaels and Wilson cheered Ros on.

Out of the wall of speakers behind the c-ball table, the lead singer of White Rabbit hollered about his burning balls.

Whatever happened to real music? Garrett thought. He and Carla had argued about music regularly. She'd liked this kind of screaming loud shit—made her feel alive, she said—whereas Garrett was more of a classical music kind of guy—Mozart, Brahms. Garrett swirled his beer around in the glass. He had learned a lot from Carla, how to push the envelope on protocols, bend the rules a little to make the system work for their patients, how to listen to your gut and brain simultaneously. But he'd retreated a little after she was killed. Tended to play it safe, too safe, maybe. The Army suited him. Discipline, routine. Kept him from thinking too much, feeling too much. In fact, the Army fit him almost too well, especially this virtual combat training duty. So comfortable. Much less stressful than the streets of Damascus. Or even Seattle. He liked the virtcom sims: knowing they were simulations made them more like full-blown arcade games, took the shit-pissing terror out of the combat part of the Army, as far as he was concerned.

The technical team that designed the virtual reality combat training—the Nerds—had programmed the virtual combat suits to take simulated hits and induce appropriate pain responses. The rationale was that experiencing hits, and the subsequent pain or disability, while in the combat

zone, was critical to removing the fear from the soldier, and when the fear was gone, the soldier could continue to function. And functioning soldiers were still cheaper than equipment.

Ros scored another point. Henderson scowled, took up her position again.

Garrett stood. He looked toward the door. The music throbbed inside his head. Smoke burned his eyes. But he picked up his beer and found a stool along the bar near the crashball table instead.

CandyAss joined him. "Happy birthday, Doc!" He slipped a small gift-wrapped box along the counter.

Garrett raised his eyebrows.

"A little something clandestine," CandyAss said. "For your suit."

"You know we're not supposed to put anything on the suit," Garrett said as he grabbed the box and tore off the wrap. He flipped the lid. Inside the thin cardboard box lay a child's sticker: Marvin the Martian, ray gun in his white-gloved hand, attached balloon saying, "Take me to your leader!" Garrett threw his head back and howled.

CandyAss grinned.

GARRETT'S BARE FEET SLAPPED ONTO THE FLOOR

Sirens wailed in the hallway.

Those motherfucking Nerds and their 0300 sims, he thought sourly as he pulled on his virtcom suit. He clamped on the jointed sections of body armor, then wrestled into his fatigues and boots. He snapped his bug-face in place, tongued the boot-up clit. The oxygen and video display came on-line.

He walked to the locker room, his company pounding past him.

"Move your ass, Doc," Henderson said, her radio voice loud in his ears, as she jostled him out of her way.

Never run, Garrett had been told at the paramedic academy. Unless you're running away, and then run fast. Need to keep the adrenaline down, pulse slow, respirations easy. Too much adrenaline makes your hands shake and narrows your vision. Makes it hard to be watchful. And being watchful will save your arrogant hard-ass more than once, they'd told him.

And it had. More than once.

He and Carla had been first car in on a shooting called in by the police. But for some reason she'd been in too much of a hurry, trusted too much when the Code Fives said the scene was secure. Hadn't waited for him, so that they could go into the scene together, him watching her back. The way it was supposed to be. The way they'd always done it before.

Carla and two cops went down.

"Glad you could make it, Garrett," Braddock said. "Lose the fatigues. Just the virtcom suit and the armor," he said, his face barely visible through the darkened bug-face visor.

"But they don't have any goddamn pockets," Garrett complained, holding up his hands.

Braddock shrugged.

Garrett stripped out of his fatigues.

"What the fuck is that?" Braddock said, pointing.

Garrett looked down. The Marvin the Martian sticker gleamed against the flat black belly armor. "A birthday present," he said.

"Jesus H. Christ, Garrett. Remember: Army rules. You'd better scrape that goddamn thing off before the next sim or the Nerds'll have a shit-fit."

Garrett geared up, collected his weapons, and climbed into the hellevator—a sardine can with wings and retro-jets, free-falling from a converted Stealth-D cargo shuttle. A soft landing in the combat zone. Sometimes the zone was quiet; sometimes it was full of fire and brimstone. They'd accomplish their mission, recon back at the hellevator, and takeoff, vertical jet thrusters, going up. Rendezvous with the Stealth.

Without their fatigues, his company looked like a bunch of armed bobsledders. Garrett scrambled to his seat and strapped himself in.

Thirty-three drops, and he still hated the hellevator. It felt like dying every time the clamps let go and the hellevator went down. Even though these were just sims, he knew one day it'd be for real, and a virtsim could never be as ass-puckering real as reality. And that knowledge scared Garrett.

"What's up, Captain?" someone asked. Garrett checked his on-line. Raid, heart rate racing. Garrett had lost money on him ever since Raid joined the company a month ago—he'd bet each time Raid would take the first hit.

"Nerds said only that it was an alien sim, people," Braddock said. "Nothing else. We're going in blind."

Garrett groaned. Not another alien sim. In his first alien sim, the "aliens" swooped out of monkey-puzzle trees. They had truncated wings and tiny faces on long skinny necks. They fired on the company's position with some sort of ray-gun. "What shit is this?" Garrett had complained during the debriefing. "The Nerds got nothing better to do with their time?" After the flying aliens came the tentacled aliens, then the slime-dripping reptile aliens. And last week, the plague of green elf-like aliens. That was when Garrett started in with his Marvin the Martian impressions: "You make me ve-ry, ve-ry angry."

A voice broke in over the helmet radio: "Two hours to drop."

"Two hours?" Michaels said. "Jesus, I shoulda gone pee before we left. Can we pull over?"

"They woke us up at three-fucking-o'clock in the morning just to sit in this tin can for two hours?" Ros said.

"Hey, Wilson, how are you feeling today?" CandyAss called out.

"My head's killing me. I musta—"

Garrett tongued the volume, turning down the chatter, and closed his eyes.

I'm thirty years old, he thought as the hellevator spun a little. The big three-oh. Hell, I'm the oldest one here. Twenty soldiers crammed into the hellevator, and every single one is younger. Except for the Captain. Ros's twenty-four. CandyAss's twenty-three, just like Henderson and Wilson. Michaels, twenty-one. Shit, he thought, some days I even *feel* old.

"DROP IN TWENTY, ON MY MARK."

Garrett jerked awake.

"Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen—"

He let his breath out, forcing his body to relax. He watched his own pulse rate fall on his bio-screen.

"How you doing, Doc?" Ros said.

"I'm too old for this shit."

She laughed.

Garrett thought he might puke. Way too much beer and not enough sleep.

"Hey, Doc." Michaels said. "It ain't the fall that'll kill you. It's the sudden stop at the bottom." He laughed.

"...nine, eight, seven..."

"Very funny, Raid," Garrett said.

"This is it, people," Braddock said. "Hold onto your back teeth."

"—two, one, Mark."

The clamps banged away, and the hellevator fell, shaking and rattling.

Garrett's body shook with the vibrations of the hellevator. He flicked through the bio-screens to distract himself. Everyone checked out. He called up the tracker grid, but nothing was on-line yet from the Nerds. Blind as blind can be, he thought.

The rattling increased.

The retro jets fired.

The hellevator hit hard, jarring Garrett's neck and back.

"External monitors unavailable," CandyAss said. "The goddamn Nerds are always fucking with the equipment."

"Okay, people," Braddock said. "Cover pattern Charlie to exit—both

Waves. Wilson, seeing as how you took first hit yesterday, you're point. Go."

The aft door fell away and the company spilled out of the hellevator into night. They scrambled to a safe position in a grove of trees.

"Listen up." Braddock waved the company down into the wet grass. "Alien sim. Setting is a big palace, with a lotta small rooms. Graphics should be coming on-line now: tracker window. Yeah, there they are. Okay, I'm getting the rules. Here's the gig: clean sweep, no prisoners. Every alien gets hit. It's a surprise party; so boys and girls, be quiet, stick to scramble frequency. We pull our own wounded this time. There's no evac team. Is that clear, Garrett? No evac team."

"Clear." Garrett had taken all four of his hits doing evacs.

"This is a non-stop sim. No Base contact. And no Nerds. Everything's pre-programmed, so we're on our own here. Seems we've graduated to the next level. Ready, people? On my mark. Wilson, you're still point, First Wave. Henderson, you're point. Second Wave. Okay?"

"Got it, Captain," said Henderson.

"Mark."

Garrett was Second Wave. He flowed through the trees behind Candy-Ass. First Wave was well ahead, barely visible through the rain. Garrett whacked up the lux count on his visor. He would prefer to use his own eyes, but the night and peripheral vision enhancers made his real eyes seem unreliable.

First Wave broke out of the trees and scuttled across a wide lawn. Second Wave covered. First Wave worked up to the wall of the stone building. Then went up the wall and onto the flat roof. Second Wave skirted to the west side of the building.

Lights were on in several high windows, but all the lower ones were dark. Henderson led them to tall arched doors. CandyAss cut through, and they were inside. Garrett upped the lux again and added infrared detection.

A dining room. Carpets—Turkish or Middle Eastern. Nice wood floors. Furniture all wood, too, hand-carved. Looked familiar to Garrett. Like stuff he'd seen when he was in Syria.

Henderson opened a door, moved out into a hall, waved them to follow. The hall was dimly lit with low wall lights. Stairs at one end. She motioned for a floor sweep. Room to room.

Empty.

Up the stairs.

Garrett shifted his weapon, loosened his shoulders. Henderson was waving at him to hurry up.

Second floor: sweep.

CandyAss eased inside the first door. "Jesus," he said. A single shot. "One." Garrett swept in after him, keeping his eyes to his assigned quadrants of the suite.

"These are ugly motherfuckers," CandyAss said.

Garrett stole a glance. Octopus tentacles, bubbled reptile flesh for a head, with two chicken-like legs. CandyAss nodded him out. Clear.

Garrett swept the second room. CandyAss, the third. Garrett, the fourth. Single shot to the torso. The tentacles wriggled as the alien went over backwards and lay still. "Two," he said.

Stairs.

Gunfire exploded above them. Scrabbling, running sounds. Screaming and shrieking. Several aliens poured out onto the polished stone stairs. Henderson raked them, blowing pieces away and splattering green-blue blood over the walls and stairs.

Henderson and Michaels secured the stairs while Garrett and CandyAss continued their floor sweep. She waved them on.

A door opened at the end of the hallway. Garrett fired. A head hit. "Three."

"Four."

"Five." Garrett chased into a room, dodged a leveled weapon, and fired. "Six."

"Seven. Eight. Nine."

"Clear."

They reconned at the stairs with Henderson and Michaels. Esperanza and Braddock were already there.

Garrett flicked through the bio-screen scan for both Waves. Clear. The tracker showed positions. First Wave was two floors above and scrambling fast. Gunfire echoed down the stairwell.

Henderson led them up the shiny stairs, through the bodies, onto the third floor. She and Michaels controlled the stairwell while the teams began the sweep.

CandyAss shot open a locked door, pushed his way in. Garrett stuck close to his back end.

Michaels' bio-screen froze the scan. Head hit, flatlining. Henderson's pulse soared. She took a hit to the chest. Then another. A third in the left shin.

"Back me up, CandyAss. Michaels and Henderson are down."

CandyAss provided fire cover, calling Esperanza and Braddock for back-up.

No evac, Garrett reminded himself as he slung his gun across his back. He dragged Henderson into an empty room, his forearms cradling the

sides of her bug-face to protect her c-spine. Michaels had been decapitated and just lay still.

Goddamn impressive graphics, Garrett thought. *Destruct* flashed across Michaels' bio-screen. Shit, Garrett thought; he'd do Michaels as soon as he had Henderson stabilized.

Garrett worked on Henderson, while CandyAss secured the floor. Spinal cord severed at T7, left lung blown open, two big holes in her chest armor. BP dropping fast. He filled the wounds with nano-sealant.

"This is a bad fucking hit, Garrett."

"No shit."

"Can't feel my legs."

"You're gonna be okay. It's just a sim, remember."

"I'm gonna complain about how much these fucking hits hurt." Pink frothy blood gurgled out of her mouth. "Jesus, Doc, I'm gonna die," she said matter-of-factly. She convulsed. Ventricular fibrillation; no carotid pulse. Garrett flipped off her chest armor and whacked her sternum with a precordial thump. Nothing. He pulled out the defibrillator as he initiated the high O₂ dump into her helmet and watched her face through the visor. Breath sounds in her right lung—air was going in—nothing in her left lung. He hooked up the defibrillator to the paddles built into her suit and shocked her at 200 joules. Still v-fib. Three hundred joules; nothing. He upped the joules again, working quickly through the defib protocol. No response. Bio-screen showed asystole. He prepped the epi, and injected it. Nothing.

CandyAss stepped in the room. "Time's up, Doc. Gotta move."

Garrett stood.

CandyAss held up a gold ring. "Souvenir," he said as he tucked it inside his armor. Garrett snorted.

Destruct flashed across Henderson's bio-scan.

"Ah, shit." Garrett pulled the can from his bag. He sprayed Henderson from boot to bug-face with the nano-foam. They'd eat the body, suit and all, then eat each other. No trace.

"Okay, but I have to *destruct* Michaels on the way."

CandyAss nodded.

THE HELLEVATOR PUSHED INTO THE NIGHT SKY.

"Good work, people," Braddock said.

Garrett was too tired to care.

"Yeah, sure. Two losses."

"At least one was Michaels." Ros laughed.

"Michaels is buying tonight," CandyAss said. "He took First Hit. Hey,

Garrett, means you finally won the pool.”

Garrett shrugged. He hated doing sims with destruct commands built in. Empty seats on the hellevator reminded him that some day the virt-sims would end, and the real shit would begin. Reminded him of sitting in the hallway outside the OR waiting for Carla’s doctor to come tell him what he already knew.

White Rabbit whined out of the speakers. Garrett rubbed his eyes, then rolled his head down, stretching the muscles in the back of his neck. He drank V8 juice. Twenty minutes till the debriefing.

“Jesus, I’m tired,” Ros said.

CandyAss landed on the stool next to Garrett. “What’s up, Doc?”

“Very funny.” Garrett clunked his juice glass on the bar. “Who picks this shit music?”

“Me,” Ros said.

CandyAss twisted on the stool. “I got something to show you.”

Garrett turned. CandyAss opened his hand. In it, a gold ring, a wedding band.

Garrett shrugged. “Nice,” he said, frowning, “you proposing?” Then his pulse leapt, and his vision narrowed. He lowered his voice. “That’s the shit you took from the sim.”

CandyAss nodded and scratched the back of his head. “Uh-huh.”

“Lemme see,” said Ros, taking the ring out of CandyAss’s hand. “But all the other stuff you took—the stone, that coin, the piece of that flying alien’s ray gun—they all vanished when the sim was over.”

“Like, no shit.”

“Why would they start using real props? Just to have guys like you steal them?” Garrett said.

“It wasn’t a sim.”

Garrett rested his elbows on the bar. “What are you talking about?”

“Jesus, CandyAss,” Ros said, “it was an *alien* sim. You’re not going to tell me we were wasting real live extra-terrestrials, are you?” She shook her head. “All because the Nerds used a real prop.”

“They weren’t aliens; they just looked like aliens. To us.”

“That’s weird, man,” Garrett said. “And paranoid.”

“Really fucking paranoid,” Ros added, tossing him the ring.

CandyAss shrugged, plucked the wedding band out of the air. “Maybe.” He licked his lips. “You seen Michaels?”

CLANK.

“What the fuck?” CandyAss flipped through the console menus.

"Captain, they're dropping us!"

"What?" Braddock said.

Garrett groaned. They'd been scrambled while still at the club. Hadn't even made it to debriefing time and the Nerds had them back at it. Garrett checked the bio-screens. Everybody combat normal. Actually, more quiet than usual: everybody was tired. Not even a peep out of Michaels the whole way. He and Henderson had been waiting in the hellevator, bug-faces on and completely suited up when the rest of the unit climbed aboard. Neither of them said a thing when the crew harangued them. Not even Michaels.

Clank

The hellevator descended.

"Mothership?" Braddock said.

"Communication's down. Shit. There they go: all our external leads are down, too. No contact."

"What's our free-fall trajectory termination point?"

"Our trajectory will take us to...the middle of the goddamn Pacific Ocean."

"Plot in a course for Pearl Harbor, and see if this thing can fly us that far."

"Stand by." CandyAss clicked through calculations on his console. "No good, it's too far."

"What about Alaska? Or the coast of Washington?"

CandyAss rolled the console ball. "Negative. Maybe Vancouver Island in Canada."

"Okay," Braddock said. "Plot in a course. Transfer console to manual, and fly us as far as you can."

"Flight jets not responding."

"Well, shit! All right, people, prepare to eject."

"Ten-four," CandyAss said. "Stand by...blowing side panels...now."

Explosions rattled the hellevator as the fore and aft walls disappeared into the night. Wind screamed through the interior.

"Ejecting both Waves, on my mark...four...three...two...one..."

Garrett closed his eyes and held his breath.

"Mark."

Garrett opened one eye.

"Goddamn motherfuckers!" CandyAss shouted.

"C'mon, CandyAss, blow us clear."

"There's a malfunction." CandyAss hammered on the console with his fist.

It's just a sim, Garrett told himself. It's just a sim.

"Individual chairs, boys and girls. You know the drill," Braddock said.

"Eject the back-up rafts, CandyAss."

"Rafts away."

Garrett released the clamps on his chair, counted down for ejection, scanned the bio reads. Everybody's rates were up where they should be. Except CandyAss's, which were high.

"Hey, Raid!" CandyAss said. No response from Michaels. "Hey, Raid, give us a howl."

Garrett stared across at Michaels, tried to see inside his dark helmet. Kicked up his lux count, stared again. Jesus, he thought, his face doesn't look right. "Michaels, you okay?" he said.

"Let's go, people!" Braddock shouted. "Henderson! You're first, remember?"

Henderson ejected, her rockets shooting her straight out the side.

Wilson next.

"Doc?" said CandyAss.

"Yeah?"

"The bugs killed Raid dead. That's not Raid, man."

An alarm on CandyAss's console: "Incoming," he said. "Two o'clock. Stilleto-19s. Their ours."

Esperanza released her chair clamps. "Later, CandyAss," she said, before disappearing into the dark.

"Garrett, you're up," Braddock said.

"Captain, they've locked onto us."

"You're kidding?"

"Friendly fire from two o'clock."

Garrett ejected.

HE CAME TO, ROCKING BACK AND FORTH. FLARES FROM HIS SEAT LIGHTING THE underside of his chute.

The bugs killed Raid dead.

"Doc? Captain? CandyAss?" Ros's voice.

He tongued the company channel as his helmet flashed through the bio screens. Esperanza: stable vital signs. No injuries.

"Ros. It's Garrett." He flicked up the grid. She was about half a mile away.

"Doc. Jesus Christ. I've been tracking your descent. I keep losing the video in my bug-face. I keep having to reboot to get it back on."

"You in the water?"

"Yeah. I'm almost to one of the rafts, but the swell keeps moving it away."

"Stand by." The water was coming up fast now. Garrett hit the retros.

The chair splashed hard, going deep. Garrett released the chute, and waited for the chair to buoy him to the surface. His helmet died, plunging him into darkness. He hit the reboot and the video came back on line. The chair pushed him to the surface.

The swell lifted him, spun him in his chair, then rolled him under. Kicking and gouging at the water with his arms, he righted himself.

"You there, Doc?" Ros said, static muffling her words.

"Yeah. Had to reboot."

"I've got the raft. I'm almost in." Breathing hard.

Garrett flicked through the bio-scan. Henderson. Candy-Ass. Braddock, Michaels, no read at all. Wilson. unresponsive, penetrating object to the chest, BP 80/40, pulse dropping. No read on any of the rest of the company.

"Wilson, can you hear me?" Garrett shouted.

"This is Ros. Doc. I'm in the raft, and I'm coming to get you. Turn on your headlamp for visual."

"Wilson's at four o'clock to your position, maybe a quarter of a mile. He's unresponsive, hemorrhaging a lot from the looks of his bio-read."

"I'm coming for you first."

"No, get Wilson."

"Don't be an ass, Doc. You know the drill."

Garrett pounded his hands against his chair arms. Wilson's bio-read showed asystole. "He's coded, Ros."

The raft slashed through the waves and swung alongside Garrett. Ros grabbed at his chair. He released his harness and rolled into the raft, knocking her down. She pushed him away.

"Let's go," he said.

"Okay, then we break out the transmitter and launch the flares."

"Yeah. Sure."

Garrett knelt in the bottom of the raft as Ros swung it around and gunned it to Wilson's location. He dug out the searchlight, flicked on the power, shooting light out into the darkness.

"We're almost there," Ros said.

The light caught reflectors on a dark form bobbing in the water. "There," Garrett said.

Ros eased the raft alongside Wilson's chair. A spear of metal, some wreckage from the hellevator, impaled him to his chair.

"We can't pull him into the raft with that thing sticking out," Ros said.

Garrett let out a deep breath. "You're right. But here, hold his chair against the raft." She grabbed at the chute ropes.

Garrett scrambled on top of Wilson, careful not to stick himself on the shrapnel. He twisted off Wilson's bug face, and eased it over his head.

"Christ, Doc," Ros said. "what are you doing? You know the rules."

In the light from Garrett's headlamp, Wilson's face looked swollen and blue. Garrett tossed the helmet into the raft, reached inside Wilson's virtcom suit for his tags.

"You took his goddamn bug-face off! Are you nuts?" Ros yelled as she pushed Wilson's chair away from the raft's soft hull.

Garrett scrambled back into the raft. "I want the memory in his helmet. The tags are for Shona, his wife. How far do you think it is to Vancouver Island?"

"What? For his wife? Let's just set off the flares, get the transmitter going. Do the drill. We've—"

"No. We quit using the radio channel, flatline our suits, dump the transmitter overboard, and get as far from here as we can before daylight."

"You *are* nuts. They'll roast your ass!"

"Didn't you hear CandyAss? They were Stilettos, Ros. It was friendly fire. Bugs killed Raid dead, remember?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But what?"

"But, it's just a sim."

"It's your call, Ros. You're the superior officer now. You're the leader."

"It's just a fucking sim, Doc! Did *they* put you up to this?"

"We got scrambled *before* the debriefing, Ros. Did you talk to Henderson? Or Michaels?"

"No, but so what?"

"When has Michaels ever shut up? I looked at his face, through the tint in his visor: his face didn't look right; it wasn't Michaels's face." He took a deep breath, struggled to keep his balance as the raft rolled with the waves. "You saw CandyAss's ring."

"Fuck you, Garrett!" She scrambled to the transmitter tub, jerked it open.

Garrett pulled his revolver, wondering if he could even use it on Ros. Shoot her in the back just like that asshole had done to Carla. His pulse banged and his hands shook.

Ros looked back at him, lit up by his headlamp, her bug-face smooth and dark. She crouched. "Those Stiletto pilots were just doing sims, weren't they?" she said. "Just like us. They have no idea who or what they blew out of the sky. And they don't care: it's just a sim. Hell, they don't even know if they're really even flying."

Garrett didn't say anything.

"Who *did* we kill in that palace?" she said slowly. Then, with a single long howl that deafened Garrett, Ros heaved the transmitter over the side of the raft.

Garrett heard her flick off the company channel.

"Ros?"

Then her bio-read flatlined as she shut down her virtcom suit.

Garrett took a deep breath and shut his suit down. He twisted his bug-face over his head. Ice-cold seawater burned his skin, and the roar of the freezing wind deafened him. Ros waved him into the shelter as she spun the raft around, and ploughed east, toward the distant coast of Vancouver Island, which he could only imagine out there on the sea's dark horizon. •



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*The song got right into your blood
like HIV, right under your skin like tiny
parasites, like morphine, like a spear.
Sha-la doo-doo-doo, sha-la dum-
dum-dum...*

Tunitis

Gary Archambault

HE WOKE UP WITH A SONG HE *FUCKING HATED* PLAYING IN HIS head. You heard that goddamn song everywhere you went. In stores, bars, the bowling alley, at hockey games, blasting from cars, in restaurants, donut shops, at the laundromat, picking up a video, buying groceries, getting a haircut, *everywhere*. Half-asleep, he put his hands against his ears, assuming the song came from outside of him. But it didn't. It was playing from *inside* of him.

Like an airborne virus, it had infiltrated and contaminated him.

Like a stray bullet, it had lodged inoperably in his brain.

Now fully awake, he grasped the futility of covering his ears.

He threw the covers aside.

First it had been a mega-smash radio hit, then a theme song for some suck-ass TV show, then yet again a huge corporate radio hit. Then it was on the soundtrack for some Hollywood no-brainer, then used in a car commercial, then a shampoo commercial. Now it was treated like some precious Golden Oldie, like everyone was nostalgic for the late nineties.

He put his feet on the floor, his head in his hands. He made a noise that was part whimper, part groan, a jigger of *Weltschmerz*, and fathomless undercurrents of stifled rage. The more he tried *not* to hear the song in his head, the more he *would* hear it—over and over at a louder and louder

volume. That's the way it worked.

It was the musical equivalent of a Chinese Finger Trap, of cult indoctrination. The more you resisted, the worse your situation got.

He stood up and coma-walked to the washroom. He knew *unwillingly* the words to every verse. The words to the chorus, Christ, he'd remember those when he was eighty-five. If he made it to eighty-five without escaping what's-her-name's grating nasal vocals by running in front of a speeding truck.

His urine hissed into the toilet, his neck and shoulders stiffened in anticipatory horror of hearing that song in his head all morning and likely all afternoon. If it wasn't gone by five he'd head straight to McHoodoo's and get sloppy fall-down drunk. This wasn't normal. This was no way for a person to live. It wasn't *natural*.

He flushed, sighed like a surgeon having lost his second patient of the day, and stepped in front of the mirror.

He wasn't quite ready to play an extra in *Night of The Living Dead*, but he was disconcertingly close. He had to get more vegetation into his diet, more sprouts and kale and chickpeas and all that kind of crap. The kind of crap that Misty had been so fanatical about. Misty. God, he'd really blown *that*, hadn't he?

The trick was—*Sha-la doo-doo-doo, sha-la dum-dum-dum*—to ignore it, to pretend you weren't hearing it. Trying to *will* it away—that didn't work. That, for some reason, made it *stronger*. You had to give it the cold shoulder, zap it with complete indifference.

He sighed again, this time like a Legal Aid lawyer facing a judge who took him less seriously than a Schwarzenegger flick.

Sprouts, chickpeas, artichokes, asparagus, green beans. Less coffee. Misty, oh Christ, now he saw her stepping out of the shower.

"If you don't watch it, sweetie butt, you're gonna become a bona fide porker."

Shit, had he really said that to her?

The pseudo-soulful chorus kicked in. Few singers could sound so earnest without sounding—as what's-her-name did—like absolute flakes. Early Springsteen, Billie Holiday, that guy in Radiohead, one or two songs by R.E.M., Bob Marley, Neil Young, and about half a dozen lesser-known British musicians like Kevin Coyne and Nick Drake. All the rest of them, no matter how stoned you might be, sounded like Jewel doing Michael Bolton doing Sting doing Elton John doing "Candle In The Wind" at Princess Di's funeral. Cynical but true. Once the point of a song became the singer's oozing sincerity, it wasn't a song anymore. It was self-advertisement. It was psychodrama. It was Sally Fields gushing, "You like me,

you really like me," at the Academy Awards ceremony. He reached for his toothbrush, trying not to tap his foot to the poisonously catchy beat, trying hard not to sing along.

It got right into your blood like HIV, right under your skin like tiny parasites, like morphine, like a spear. *Sha-la doo-doo-doo, sha-la dum-dum-dum*. No wonder Misty split. He looked like crud. The bags under his eyes had become oceans of graying flesh. There was no spark in his eyes. He looked slightly crazy, and not just because of the toothpaste foam around his mouth. No wonder, really. The last time he could remember waking up without that song playing his head was a long, long time ago. Months. Song Playing In Your Head-wise, that was a long fucking time. Somewhere between an eternity and forever.

Usually it faded by lunch hour, but not always. At least two days a week he heard it from the second he fully awoke to the second he fell asleep at night.

He rinsed and reached for his electric razor. Feeling threatened by its buzzing, the song upped its volume. He wondered how much longer he could take it. The thought of killing himself—it seemed so *final*. Maybe he should see a doctor, not a head doctor, just a physician. He'd heard they handed out meds like candy, that they had drawers full of free samples. Maybe he could drown—*Sha-la doo-doo-doo*—the song in chemicals.

Getting pissed so often had really started to take its toll on him. Just look at that guy in the mirror. Christ.

THE HEAD MANAGER, ONE OF THOSE SUPER-ANAL, IMPECCABLY MANICURED AND coiffured, go-go-go, reincarnated Nazi types who thought that using words like "proactive" and "prioritize" made him sound smart, was—having been given a certain measure of autonomy by the head office—constantly changing everything around. One day he wanted to shift the Literary Biography section from the Biography Section into the Fiction Section, which made sense, but then the next day he would change his mind and order that it be wedged between Cultural Studies and True Crime. If you asked his reasoning behind that move, he'd say something like, "Writers are weirdos, and who wants to read about weirdos? Customers who gravitate to the Cultural Studies and True Crime sections." Which, come to think of it, did make a kind of twisted sense. But then the *next* day he'd say, "All those dull, literary titles look even more boring with *Eunuchs, Witchcraft, and Salad: The Dark Side of Modern Refrigeration Techniques* and *The Girl Who Crucified Her Vagina* on one side, and *Mr. Chainsaw* and *The Angel-Faced Assassin* on the other. It's bad *feng shui*." (Pronounced *fang shooey*, and not to be funny.) "Move it to

Fiction, no, back to Biography." Then as you were doing so, he'd change his mind again, and say, "No, leave it there. There's a truckload of Harry Potter to unpack."

And if having such a manager ordering him around weren't bad enough, Phillip White had that goddamned song playing in his head. *Loudly*. To drown out the "atmosphere music" at Sentences—as though the song were *alive*, as though it were *conscious*. Absorbing some of *his* consciousness perhaps.

It is just a song, Phillip told himself, straightening up the Bargain Books. *It is neither alive nor conscious nor registered to vote.*

His stomach grumbled. A bowl of Rice Krispies with four tablespoons of sugar, a Coffee Crisp bar, and three cups of extra-strength coffee for breakfast. It was hard to believe he was twenty-three.

He finished his straightening up and approached a confused-looking customer. "Is there anything I can help you find?"

"Yeah, I, uh, I heard about this book, right? About this, like, chick who, uh, digs snakes, no, not like *that*. She's a..."

"A herpetologist."

"Yeah, right. Um, something like that."

"Sort of like—" *Sha-la doo-doo-doo*. "—like *The Crocodile Hunter*, but—" *Sha-la dum-dum-dum*. "—but it's a woman and, instead of crocs, she's into snakes."

"Yeah."

"Do you know what her name is or what the book is called?"

"No."

Two minutes at the computer later, Phillip directed the customer to the New Age section. He said the book was for his wife. And of course it was. No self-respecting guy's guy would want a book called *Romancing The Snake*, never.

BY LUNCH HOUR IT SHOWED NO SIGNS OF DEPARTING. IT KEPT ON, STEADY AS A river, noisy as a waterfall. About five times now he'd started humming and even singing along—he just couldn't help it. With the chorus came images of a sleek car sleekly zooming down a desert highway oh so sleekly, or of a woman who acted like shampooing her hair was better than cunnilingus. That second image, that was the worst—not at all what you want flickering in your mind while at work. He kept looking at Sheila a bit too long, and twice now she had caught him doing so.

Sheila. She was a luminescent ice-cream cone of utter wowness wildly out of place amidst the interminable drudgery of working at Sentences. But, alas, totally out of his league. Way, *way* too cute for one thing, and,

for another thing, she was not only from a whole other planet but of an entirely different species. She had "Class coming out her ass," as Phillip's dad would have put it. Still, he couldn't help but gaze at her with longing. Often.

"Like white trash wishing it was filet mignon," his dad would say.

"Sorry," he said the second time she caught him getting all starry-eyed towards her. "You remind me of someone."

"Neve Campbell? Jennifer Lopez?"

"Actually, a girl I knew in high school. She died."

An adorable sympathetic look danced across her face.

God, he was such a liar. It always happened around girls. Even after he'd lived with Misty for a year; he'd often find himself telling her the most ludicrous and transparent untruths. That he'd almost died from rabies when he was a kid, that he once talked a total stranger out of killing himself, that he'd spent a year in Europe, that he wrote an eight-hundred page novel called *Downside-Up* and, distraught over a girlfriend's infidelity, burned it in his backyard. Of course by then Misty reacted to pretty much anything that came from his mouth as one does towards something that's been sitting in the fridge for no one knew how long.

"Of leukemia," said Phillip.

"That's horrible."

"She ... it's hard to talk about."

He swayed to the song in his skull. Having heard that when people lie they tend to either look upwards, move their feet a lot, and/or talk robotically or grandiosely, he kept his gaze straight-ahead, his feet perfectly still, and made sure his voice was neither zombie-monotone nor anything that could be described as overly theatrical.

"You look like her, that's all."

He was such a shmuck. What a tool. What a piece of human nothingness.

Sheila bit her lower lip. "I should get back to—"

He blurted, "Every morning for months—months—I wake up with this song playing in my head. It's driving me crazy."

God it felt good to say something *true*. Some of the tension in his neck and shoulders instantly faded. "I swear, it *lives* in there. It has taken up permanent residence in my skull. It's *hell*."

"Jeez." Sheila looked repulsed, fascinated, confused, a bit scared. Nodding in a commiserating kind of way, she asked, "What song is it?"

Phillip surveyed their immediate surroundings: no sight of the manager. "I'm starting to lose it."

Telling the truth! Man, it was like finally letting loose a huge belch that

had been percolating excruciatingly in your stomach for hours. "Listen, I have an idea. I'll write the song down—" He pulled out the little notepad he kept in his Sentences shirt pocket, then his Sentences pen. "—and then, to show you how bad it is, you put your hands on my head and—I swear!—you'll hear it! I'm sure of it. It *lives* in there, like, I don't know, some kind of songbird. *Like a virus.*"

He jotted down the name of the song. "*You've* woken up with a song you didn't want playing in your head, haven't you? We *all* have. Just imagine waking up with *the same song* in your head, a song you *hate*, morning after morning, and, if that's not horrible enough, it *keeps* playing, sometimes for hours, sometimes for hours and hours and hours, sometimes *all day and all night*. Just imagine. *That's* what I'm going through. It's a nightmare."

He leaned down a bit. "Put your hands on my head."

She did and maybe it was his imagination but he would have sworn he saw all color leave her face for four or five seconds. "Do you hear it?"

She nodded, like someone asked if they'd just seen a ghost, and said in a startled, breathy whisper the name of what, needless to say, had become his least favorite tune of all time.

She pulled her hands away, and Phillip, handing her the notepad, said, "See! I *knew* you'd hear it. I just knew it. It's *stuck* in there. It's like people who hear a constant ringing in their ears."

"Tinnitus."

"Right, but in my case it's *tunitis*." He laughed, a touch hysterically and a tad too vociferously. "You *have to help me*."

Never before had Phillip White spoken truer words.

"ARE YOU SURE YOU SHOULD BE DRINKING? I MEAN, MAYBE IT'S A MEDICAL CONDITION."

"Condition shpadition. It's a curse. I need an exorcist, or whatever somebody who undoes curses is called."

"Cursed by whom?"

He loved the way she said that. *Cursed by whom?*

Christ, if only she wasn't from another planet, of another species. It was more statistically probable that he win every major lottery in North America one after the other than get *her* to go out on a date with him. A year away from a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, who volunteered two nights a week at the Suicide Hotline Centre, who was a devoted Big Sister to an eleven-year-old girl of a single mother with a substance abuse problem, who quoted Emily Dickinson and Rumi in a way that was neither flaky nor pretentious, who was fun and funny, sweet but not *too* sweet, bright and incredibly beautiful. Sheila Hindley was probably as close to seeing God as Phillip was likely to ever get (excluding that time he took mushrooms and

saw something emanating from his cactus, the one he now often felt his gaze lingering on in hope that *that* feeling of mystical insight into the universe would return).

Cursed by whom? God, that killed him. Totally floored him. She was the greatest.

"I dunno. Nobody, I guess. I was just—" Oh shit. He should have known. Some schmaltzy number by some suck-ass boy band had ended, and the first notes of *it* started. The Song That Ate His Brain. The Song From Hell. The Song That Would Not Die. "I'll be back."

He bolted not for the restroom, knowing that it would be pumped in there too, but outside.

Once he was outside, he took a deep breath. Surely Sheila would understand.

It's not there, he realized. *The song is not playing in my head!* But, alas, the instant he thought that, it started playing once again. *Tumultuously*.

"*Fuuuuck,*" he shrieked.

A single tear cascaded from each eye. He turned and, ignoring the snickering, gawking goons on the patio section of McHoodoo's, stared at the brick wall and contemplated running headfirst into it. No. One, it probably wouldn't accomplish much but a splitting headache. Two, it was safe to say that it wouldn't help make Sheila think he was suitable dating material. And three, there was a good chance he'd end up with brain damage *and still be hearing* The Song From Planet Doom, The Song That Should Not Be, The Devil Song Of Dr. Satan.

Sha-la doo-doo-doo, sha-la dum-dum-dum.

Another deep breath, then a slow, measured exhalation. He would get through this. He would survive. He'd lived through his parents divorcing, the preceding insane arguments and smashing of various household items, the ensuing stink of despair that clung to him for years. He'd lived through all of *that*, hadn't he? Not to mention the time his drunken Uncle Ralph had tried to get him to take off his clothes. "You're old enough," said his uncle. "Let's have some fun." Phillip, two weeks shy of eleven, bolted from his uncle's trailer and, crying a great deal of the way, walked the seven miles home, only to find his mom passed out from pills and Wild Turkey. So he phoned his dad, and a strange woman answered. "Yeah, what the fuck you want?" she asked, and he hung up. When he refused to go see his uncle the next weekend, his mom became infuriated and screamed, "Christ, you're like a chain around my neck, *ten* chains around my neck."

—doo-doo, sha-la dum-dum-dum. "Do you, like, have a problem?"

On the patio, one guy in particular, a muscular and not very swift-looking guy, mentally speaking, thought Phillip shrieking was about the funni-

est thing he'd ever seen. "Do I have a problem? Yeah, right. You don't see me screaming like a little girl with her panties on fire."

Muscle Guy's buddies laughed.

"This isn't TV," said Phillip. "I don't exist for your viewing amusement. People suffer, life is real." *Sha-la doo-doo-doo*. "You love *Survivor*, don't you? And Adam Sandler movies. I can see you jerking off in front of the mirror, flexing your biceps, tightening your abs. I know you. You—" *Shut up, man. Shut up.* "—think you're smart but you haven't read a book in ten years. You listen to rap music when you work out. You like how it denigrates women, how it reduces each and every one of them to bitches and hos. Because that's what they are, right? Why? Because they're on to you. They *know* you, like I know you just by looking at your stupid pig face and by the kind of clowns you hang out with. You're a cartoon."

Muscle Guy jumped over the railing and grabbed Phillip, and, having grabbed him, seemed unsure as to what to do next.

So, "Watch your mouth, faggot," he said, and his buddies yelled, "Put his lights out," and, "Break his face," and, "Your ass is grass, buddy."

Sheila appeared and yelled, "Hey, get your hands off him."

"Just 'Roid Rage," said Phillip. "It doesn't do much for your self-esteem when your balls shrink down to the size of peanuts, not to mention your brain."

"I'm *warning* you, book boy."

"You can read! Excellent. You read Sentences on my shirt pocket, and, not only that, but from reading it you deduced that I *work* at Sentences. That's very good."

Muscle Guy still held onto him by his shirt collar.

"I'm impressed. Really. Next thing you know you'll be reading Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn and—"

"Phillip, don't *provoke* him."

A waiter leaned over the railing and said, "Break it up right now or I'll call the police."

Muscle Guy let go and stepped back.

"Later," he said in a manner intended to sound threatening but sounded more like he was auditioning for a part on *Law & Order*.

"Let's go for a walk," Phillip said to Sheila. "It's kind of nice out."

"YOU STILL HEARING IT?"

"It's like the typical guy. It comes and goes."

She sort of laughed but kind of didn't

"The worst thing is, as soon as I *don't* hear it in my head, I think: *Hey, it's gone. Silence, wonderful silence.* But as soon as I think that, once I, like,

acknowledge its absence, it starts up again."

"Boy."

"I'm sorry about that back there. I got picked on in school a lot. My parents divorced and suddenly I was freak boy. The kid who walked around looking depressed and lost. Usually bully types just annoy me, but, well, I've been going through a lot lately."

Instead of telling bullshit stories about being in a bank during a robbery; about getting attacked by bats. he was just being himself, just talking. Weird. And even weirder, it wasn't that hard. "It's so invasive," he said. "Like, everywhere you go some song is blasting into your brain. Songs you wouldn't *choose* to listen to in a million years. It's like mind rape."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Some songs. God, I want to scream when I hear them. I mean, I hated it the first time I heard it, so, like, hearing it for the millionth time is torture. But, well, hey, we could be deaf, right? Imagine having never heard music?"

"Christ, I'm not sure if that would be such a bad thing, really."

"That's sad. I mean, it's sad you feel that way."

"Music is the language of the soul but it's been turned into plastic, over-produced hypno-brainwashing dildos of advertising and schmaltz and corporate crud shoved against our wills into our ear holes."

At *that* she laughed.

"Let me buy you something to eat," said Phillip. "You've been so nice to me."

"Sure. I guess so."

THEY GOT SOME FRIED CHICKEN, FRIES AND POP AND HEADED TO THE PARKETTE across the street. As they approached the picnic table, a squirrel darted from beneath it. He hated seeing squirrels surrounded by so much traffic. It would just be a matter of time before they got crunched. Nature wasn't hardwired to deal with man-made monsters going eighty miles an hour.

"Are you *sure* you're not a vegetarian?" Being a compulsive liar, he tended to think that everyone else was too.

"Nope, I'm not. I eat dead things."

They got comfortable and started chomping away on their chunks of greasy death and soggy fries, with a sugar-water chaser.

"God," said Sheila. "You know what? Now *I'm* hearing it in my head."

The thought that what he had might be contagious—it turned his blood into cold flowing gasoline, his stomach into land-mine aftermath.

No, it couldn't be. It wasn't. It was *his* problem. Something about *his* head, a chronic vacuity most likely, had enabled the song to take permanent root inside there.

But, hey, lots of things were transmittable and no one understood why. Yawning, enthusiasm, violence in the Middle East, stupidity.

"I put the thought in your head," he said, a French fry hanging limply from his hand. "That's all."

But maybe it wasn't. Maybe he had put the song in her head. *Sha-la doo-doo-doo, sha-la dum-dum-dum*. Not just the thought of having it in her head but the song.

"You don't look well," said Sheila.

SHEILA'S ROOMIE WAS AT THE MOVIES. FENG SHUI-WISE, THEIR PLACE WAS CALMING and centering and strangely invigorating in a calming, centering sort of way. At least he figured it would be if it weren't *Sha-la doo-doo-dooing* through two hundred watt cranial speakers hooked to his cerebral cortex or surreal vortex or whatever the hell it was called. God, it was hard to concentrate. Hard not to start banging his head on the coffee table.

"You still gonna work weekends?" yelled Phillip.

"Huh?" In the last hour she had begun to look increasingly not right. A cross between Picasso's *Woman Weeping* and Aphrodite after twenty-eight cups of espresso. "Weekends?"

"When you go back to university."

"Oh, right."

He awaited a response. Sheila had suggested some loud tunes to drown out the tune, the *tunitis*, and Iggy Pop screamed, "Now I wanna be your dog," as The Stooges assaulted them with the dirty, droning, oddly moving G, F#, E guitar riff.

It made conversation possible only via yelling at the top of your lungs, but, at the same time, they hardly even heard the blasting raunch.

"Well?" yelled Phillip.

She didn't hear him.

She sat across from him, perched on the edge of the sofa. She not only dug vinyl but had forgotten classics like Spirit's *Twelve Dreams of Dr. Sardonicus*, and—oh ecstasy!—*Mirror Man* by Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band. He had gone through them as she made them some chamomile tea—which wasn't doing anything in terms of relaxing him. Vinyl, forgotten classics, and look at all those books! Last but not least, those breasts of hers. Oh God, what he'd give to kiss them right this second. To nuzzle his *Sha-la dum-dum-dum*-infested face between them.

"Maybe we should—" shouted Sheila. God, she looked terrible. Like his mom did during her diet pill period. Like she was about to start chewing holes in the carpet and ranting about Them.

"Whhaaat?" He slid forward on his chair. His body felt brittle and heavy,

alien and unusually porous.

"*Maybe. We. Should—*"

The fourth word she bellowed was incomprehensible. He realized the cup in his spongy, two-hundred-pound-hand was shaking, that his tea was splashing all over the place. "*I can't—*"

"*Fuuuuck! Maybe we should fuck!*"

Sha-la doo-doo-doo, he put his hand on her belly. *Sha-la dum-dum-dum*. and she sighed. God, she was beyond beautiful. She was art made flesh.

He kissed her neck and the chorus kicked in. They were hearing The Song That Never Ends in sync, he was sure of it.

Sheila moaned but not in a manner befitting their present activity.

"I have—" she began, and twitched and brushed an invisible bug from her face. "I have this overwhelming desire to buy a new car and shampoo my hair."

"Just ignore it," he said, a ravaged veteran of what she was experiencing.

Speaking in the voice of One Who Knows made him feel manly and virile and the appropriate part of his anatomy responded.

Only to be rendered instantly flaccid by: "Wash my hair, buy a car, watch TV, see a movie, and praise corporations for their humanitarian efforts. They *care*, they do. Because we *do* deserve a break today."

It wasn't just *what* she said that affected him like saltpeter; it was how she said it. She was a hundred miles away. Right there, naked, with his hand now caressing her breasts, but she felt nothing. Because that's what it did to you.

"You're the most exhilarating and *gorgeous* woman I've ever been near," he said desperately, but either she didn't hear or chose not to respond.

His hand slid down between her legs and—nothing.

"Shampoo," he said and *there*, Sheila spasmed as if undergoing some erotic kind of ECT.

"Oozing between your fingers," he said, "so thick and bubbly and luscious, and it smells like—like the inside of a new car."

"*Ohhhh!*"

Her arousal wasn't infectious, however. *He* wasn't turning her crank, he realized. *It was: the song.*

"I can't," he said and pulled away.

"*More*," she demanded. Shrieked. Eyes open grotesquely wide.

"Down the street," she babbled, sitting up. "We'll pick up some shampoo on the way. Smash the window with a rock. Eldorado Auto, I think it's called. *C'mon, let's go.*"

She seized his hand. "I need that smell, that new—" She moaned in pelvic rapture. "Car—" She moaned again. "Smell."

Noting his reticence, she screamed, "I *need* it, you loser. I *need* it."

"It's the *song*, Sheila. The *song*."

She jumped off the bed. "You—" She grabbed her head as though bees, hundreds of them, had flown up her nose. "It—"

"Don't fight it. Resisting it makes it more powerful." This time, speaking in The Voice of Experience triggered off not even a trickle of testosterone.

"It *hurts*." She punched herself. "Dirty. My hair is *filthy*. I'm disgusting. I *need* things. Or people will hate me. They should. I'm *revolting*."

Being more sensitive than him, more sensate, The Song From Hell was affecting her more quickly, more forcefully. Or so Phillip surmised.

"We need to be deprogrammed," he said. But finding a deprogrammer, not to mention the money to pay him—that would take too long. They needed a solution right *now*.

Him waking up every morning with it *Sha-la doo-doo-dooing* in his head and knowing it might keep playing *all day* was one thing. Watching Sheila convulsing and pulling at her hair and moaning as if her insides were on fire was something else altogether.

He slid his legs off her bed with a calmness he hadn't felt in what was probably months but felt like decades.

THE BREEZE PULLED AT THE ROBE SHEILA HAD THROWN ON. THEY STOOD ON THE roof of the apartment building she and her roomie lived in.

Looking down from the edge, he wished they were higher. He'd heard of people surviving falls from four-story windows, and the thought of living paralyzed from the neck down *and* hearing The Song That Wouldn't Die in his head *ad nauseam* appealed to him not at all.

Clutching her robe, Sheila shivered although it was actually quite warm out. She said, "Yes, it's the only way."

She sounded like a Moonie, like the song stuck on repeat in her pretty head had so thoroughly violated and invaded and raped her very being that there was only a faint intangible very tenuous hint of her left.

"I'm not scared," she added.

"Of course you are."

Phillip ached for a going-away beer. He longed for a farewell punch to the face of the branch manager at Sentences.

He yearned to kiss Sheila and have her feel it. Have himself feel it.

To want the song blasting away in his brain to stop—there was no point in that, because it wasn't going to happen. He was certain of it. It was there for good.

"Yeah, I am," said Sheila. "Terrified, actually."

"It's the only solution."

"It is."

"Take my hand."

"I can't or my robe will fly open."

"You're very beautiful, you know. And real."

She *had* been, he realized. Until...

"Don't," she said.

"Maybe we..."

"No. We have to do it. We have to. Or we'll give it to others."

"On the count of three?"

She went to brush her hair from her eyes, wanting one last good look at the world she was leaving, and a gust of wind blew her robe open and, four stories below and across the street, Ron Verwick pointed up and said to his brother Dan who was helping him move: "Jesus, *look!*"

Dan dropped the box of dishes he was carrying and said, "What the hell are they doing up there?"

"One," said Phillip.

"The mattress," said Ron, and ran towards his Chevy with the mattress on top, not yet fastened to the roof, thank God.

"Two," said Phillip.

"Wait," said Sheila.

"What?"

Fuck, he hated being interrupted. Watch TV and every eight or nine minutes you were interrupted by commercials. Callers forever cut into the line at work. Get a cool thought happening in your head and you got interrupted by an unnecessarily loud pop jingle when you strolled into the corner store, the grocery store, into the pool hall, into *anywhere*. Try to tell a story at a party, and people, having lived on a diet of Oprah and Letterman, interrupted with moronic questions, lame comments, unfunny quips, not occasionally *but every twelve and a half seconds*. Cell phones shrilled in theatres and playhouses, at weddings and funerals, at bar mitzvahs and in so-called quiet restaurants. Having been interrupted every five minutes for their entire lives—by insulting ads, by call waiting, by cell phones, by panhandlers, by beepers, by idiots—people thought it was fine, no, *their right* to interrupt you as often and pointlessly as they wanted. "You wanted to come out," he recalled his mom saying, "but we had to wait for the doctor." It was an interruption *world*, an invasive, intrusive, telemarketing, TV ads tweaked to affect you *more*, junk mail, in-your-face salespersons, survey-taking, privacy-free, spy cam, *I Wanna Kill You, Bitch* rap blasting from four-wheeled boomboxes planet of the fucking apes.

Sheila, having enshrouded her loveliness with her robe, said, "One last—" *Sha-la doo-doo-doo*. "—kiss."

"Oh. Okay."

Their lips touched and he almost nearly but not quite felt something.

"IT'S GONE," HE SAID, CRUTCHES WEDGED UNDER HIS ARMPITS, THE MORPHINE making his voice sound underwatery and fraught with poetic significance.

She smiled. Not an easy feat considering all the bandages hugging her head. "I know," she said.

He crutched to the end of her bed. "We have to get away."

"What?"

"We can't take the chance of ever hearing that song again. It will start the whole process all over again. I'm convinced of it."

"Shit." She tried to sit up in alarm, but couldn't. "Oh God."

"We have to... I don't know. Go out into the bush. Build a log cabin. Grow sprouts. Carrots. Kale."

"What the hell is *kale*?"

"We *have* to. If we get it again, we might give it to others."

"I don't know, Phillip. I hate bugs. Not, like, spiders and stuff, but mosquitoes. Things that suck your blood."

"This *world* sucks your blood. We have to get away from it. From what we've done to it. Maybe some *other* song will get stuck in our heads. What then?"

"Boy."

"Hey guys," someone said suddenly. "Guys and *women*, I should say."

It was the branch manager. "Phillip. Sheila. How's it going?"

He looked and sounded genuinely concerned. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy, thought Phillip. Maybe the song had totally distorted his perceptions. Maybe the song had *wanted* him to see people as creepy, to see everything as wanting. That way he'd try to appease his disillusion and disappointment with products.

It occurred to Phillip that he didn't even know his boss's *name*.

"You like 'em?" asked the branch manager, holding up the flowers he'd brought. "I don't know what kind they are but they're pretty, aren't they?"

He carried them to the bedside table, set them down, and took a seat.

Sheila looked at Phillip, and Phillip looked at Sheila.

"You wouldn't believe," said what's-his-name. "I was listening to the radio on the way over here and—get this: they say that in the last six months the suicide rate in North America has *quadrupled*. And even weirder, psych wards are filling up with unsuccessful suicide attempters—or attemptees, or whatever they're called—who say they had a song playing in their head over and over and that *that's* why they tried to kill themselves. Weird, eh?"

Although they hadn't discussed it, both Phillip and Sheila had told the doctors that the wind had blown them off the roof, that they were up there for some fresh air, that they'd fallen not jumped.

What's-his-name continued, "That *can* drive you crazy, can't it? You know, *I've* woken up with a song in my head a lot lately. That song by what's-her-name. The one that goes—"

"*No,*" yelled Sheila and Phillip in unison.

Silence filled the hospital room. Sweet, perfect silence.

Then a soft, bewildered groan came from amidst all the bandages around Sheila's song-free head. Presently song-free, anyway.

"Asparagus," said Phillip. "Green beans. Spinach. Rhubarb." •

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about our contributors

GARY ARCHAMBAULT has had stories in *On Spec* ("The Blue Blue Grass of Home," Summer 2001), *subTerrain*, and *The Algonquin Roundtable Review*.

KEVIN COCKLE says: "I've had a haphazard writing sub-career, having been approached in the past for the odd screen or teleplay, none of which have ever gotten past the crucial pay-the-writer stage. Most recently, I've been involved in boxing journalism, covering the local club scene as well as televised events, interviewing fighters, providing in-depth analysis and routinely picking the wrong fighter to win the big bouts. 'Company Man' is my first short story sale. Feels good."

A.B. GOELMAN wrote "Coyotes Are An Urban Animal" while living on the east side of Vancouver. Since then he has relocated to a similar neighborhood on the east side of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he is a doctoral student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His story "Lost on the Road" won second prize in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest (first quarter, 2001) and was consequently published in *Writers of the Future*, Volume 18.

DANIEL KSENYCH lives in Guelph, Ontario and has published a number of short stories in online and print magazines. (From cover letter: Daniel Ksenych is the Assistant Manager of Putting It Together Productions, a company devoted to community-based arts projects. His stories have appeared online at *PlanetMag*, *QuantumMuse*, *The Online Reader*, *EOTU*, and *Opi8*, and in print in *Broken Pencil*.)

CHRISTIAN MCPHERSON's writing has appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *The Grist Mill*, *Kaleidoscope—An International Journal of Poetry*, *SEEDS 3*, CPA's *Oval Victory*, *Open Window III*, and Toronto's *Outreach Connection*. He lives in Ottawa, ON with his wife Marty.

STEVEN MILLS lives in Nelson, BC. He has published short stories in *On Spec* ("No Life Like It" is his fourth appearance here), *The New Quarterly*, and *TickleAce*, and won an Honorable Mention in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest in the first quarter of 2001. He is still working on his first novel.

STEVEN MOHAN, JR. is a former quarterly winner of the Writers of the Future contest. He has sold short fiction to *Weird*

Tales, Aboriginal Science Fiction, Talebones, Extremes 4: Darkest Africa, Fantastic Stories, and Leading Edge.

Ex-reporter KEN RAND resides in Utah. He has sold fiction to *Writers of the Future*, volume 13 (2nd place), *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, volume 2 (3rd place), *Extremes*, volumes one and three (Lone Wolf Publications), *Weird Tales, Aboriginal SF*, and four dozen other magazines and anthologies. *Tales of the Lucky Nickel Saloon*, a story collection, is out from Yard Dog Press. Rand's *The 10% Solution: Self-editing for the Modern Writer*, Fairwood Press, is in its third printing. His website: www.sfwa.org/members/Rand/. His writing and living philosophy: "Lighten up."

WES SMIDERLE is an Ottawa freelance writer who finds shipwrecks, ghostly lights, and cottage country all equally frightening concepts. This story was written in the wake of a long summer week filled with beaches, comely maidens and beer. It is his third appearance in *On Spec* and his first published horror story.

FRANK WU's art has materialized in many magazines, including *Fantastic Stories, Talebones, Darkling Plain, Altair, E-scape* and *Strange Horizons*. He's also painted covers for books from Aardwolf Press by Mark Siegel, Jennifer Barlow and Daniel Pearlman. Due out later this year is a Wheatland Press book of short stories by Jay Lake, each illustrated by Wu; the collection will be entitled *Greetings from Lake Wu*. Frank won the Illustrators of the Future Grand Prize and was a finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Fan Artist.

When not doing art, Frank can be found hanging out with monks, riding in banana-shaped mopeds, touching art when the museum guards aren't looking, or walking the earth, meeting people, getting into adventures, you know, like Caine in *Kung Fu*.

Frank's cover painting, "Evil Fairy Godmother," originally appeared in the spring issue of *Fantastic Stories* as an illustration for the story "Cindy," by James Dorr. It went on to win the Best Fantasy—Pro Choice Award at Norwescon science fiction convention in Seattle, 2002. •

in upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by RANDY D. ASHBURN, CAT ASHTON, ELIZABETH BEAR, SIOBHAN CARROLL, CAROLYN CLINK, A.M. DELAMONICA, PATRICIA DISCHNER, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, A.B. GOELMAN, MELISSA HARDY, TERRY HAYMAN, CLAUDE LALUMIÈRE, CHRISTIAN MCPHERSON, STEVEN MILLS, STEVE MOHN, JOSHUA PROWSE, PATRICIA RUTALE, WES SMIDERLE, CRAIG STRICKLAND, HARVEY WALKER, JAMES WILSON, and many more!

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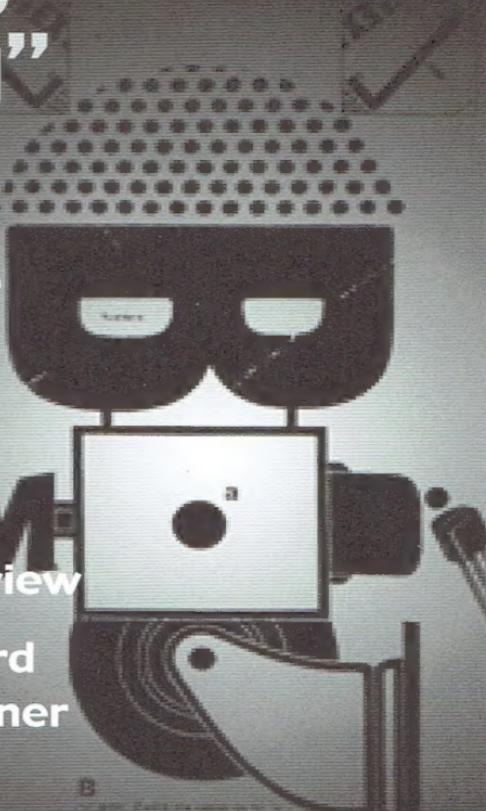


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